

Rice University

**The Heretical Revival:
The Nag Hammadi Library in American Religion and Culture**

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A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

Doctor of Philosophy

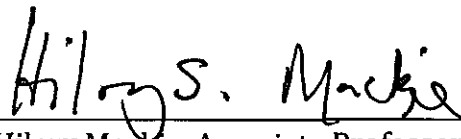
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THE HERETICAL REVIVAL: THE NAG HAMMADI LIBRARY IN AMERICAN RELIGION AND CULTURE

Introduction

“In premodern situations there is a world of religious certainty, occasionally ruptured by heretical deviations. By contrast, the modern situation is a world of religious uncertainty, occasionally staved off by more or less precarious constructions of religious affirmation.” ~ Peter Berger¹

“Acts of identification transmute a researched past into a remembered past, and transform history into myth.” ~ Jan Assmann²

Few true stories have captivated the imagination of the public in the 20th century like the discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices.³ The contours of the tale are the stuff of cinema made real: just outside Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in a field of boulders beneath the towering cliffs of the Jabl al-Tarif, an illiterate farmer named Muhammad ‘Ali al-Samman struck an antique earthenware jar while digging for nitrate-enriched fertilizer. Once the jar was unearthed, Muhammad was apprehensive about unloading its contents: might this strange cylinder from ancient burial grounds contain nefarious *jinn*? Yet what if instead of powerful spirits, the jar contained unimaginable treasures?

Apprehension bedamned, Muhammad smashed opened the jar.

No real *jinn* or gold, of course, fell from that now busted jar, but the tiny golden flecks of papyrus that floated into the air foretold the greatest archaeological treasure of the 20th century. These twelve antique codices were written in Coptic. The contents of the library are translations from Greek originals into Egyptian dialects for those located beyond major urban centers.

None of this was known to Muhammad. The farm hand tore several of the codices in pieces in an attempt to divide the find amongst his fellow itinerants. After they declined, he

¹ Berger *The Heretical Imperative*, 28..

² Assmann 2006, 186. “Egypt in Western Memory”

³ My rendering of the account follows Robinson’s reconstruction. See Robinson *The Nag Hammadi Library in English 1st Ed*, 1-25; “The Nag Hammadi Discoveries,” 206-224; *The Nag Hammadi Library, Revised Edition*, 1-25; “From the Cliffs to Cairo”, 1-54; and *The Nag Hammadi Discoveries*, 1.1-121.

returned to his mud-brick home and tossed the texts onto the patio. As we now know, his mother even burned some of the loose remnants as kindling.

History and Memory

What had Muhammad found? Where did it come from? Why was it buried?

One interpretation of the NHL's antique history has been reproduced numerous times in newspapers, documentaries, and books.⁴ Given the proximity of the Jabl al-Tarif to the Christian monastery at Pbow, it is assumed that the library once belonged to Christian monks. When these monks received Bishop Athanasius' 39th Festal Letter in 367 CE, they were motivated to destroy all extra-canonical scriptures. But they could not bring themselves to burn the Nag Hammadi codices. So, it is supposed, a group of monks gathered the texts into a large jar and buried them in a nearby cliff for posterity.

However, the Pachomian origin story is only one hypothesis (and a problematic one at that).⁵ Scholars and historians offer competing answers to the questions of provenance and burial. It may have been the library of an unknown group of Egyptian Gnostics.⁶ Perhaps the library is a collection prepared for a new heresiology.⁷ Maybe it was the property of a rich Egyptian with cosmopolitan tastes.⁸ Or maybe the collection served as funerary texts in the tradition of the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*.⁹ The acceptance of any of these alternatives renders burial of the codices as a response to Athanasius problematic. Yet these alternative hypotheses are sparingly treated in popular documentaries, periodicals, or best-selling crossover books.

My suspicion is that the Pachomian origins story did not become dominant in the American consciousness because of its intrinsic historical plausibility. It won because it is the

⁴ The Pachomian origins story is found in seminal works such as: Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 16-20 and parallels; Pagels *Gnostic Gospels*, 120; idem *Beyond Belief*, 175-179; Meyer *The Gnostic Discoveries*, 23-26; King *What is Gnosticism?*, 233; Ehrman *Lost Christianities*, 54-55;; "The Lost Gospels" BBC.; Meyer et al, *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, 6.

⁵ Suspicion of the monastic origins of the NHL has been around since the initial discovery. Doresse, a scholar whose primary focus was Egyptian monasticism, argued against a monastic provenance on codicological and codigraphical grounds (Doresse, *Secret Book of the Egyptian Gnostics*). Andre Vellieux's analysis of the cartonnage challenged evidence that seemed to point to the monastery. More recently, scholars such as Denzy-Lewis ("Rethinking the Origins of the Nag Hammadi Library," 2014) and Michael Kaler (*The Cultic Milieu, Nag Hammadi Collectors, and Gnosticism*, 2009) have challenged whether a monastic setting best explains the contents of the library. By contrast, the most rigorous argument for the monastic origins is from Lundhaug and Jenott, *The Monastic Origins of the Nag Hammadi Codices*.

⁶ Doresse *The Secret Book of the Egyptian Gnostics*.

⁷ Save-Soderbergh, 1966.

⁸ Krause 1966; Kaler, "The Cultic Milieu, Nag Hammadi Collectors, and Gnosticism."

⁹ Denzey-Lewis, *Introduction to "Gnosticism."*

most *meaningful*.¹⁰ The narrative implies a spiritual, inclusive form of early Christianity that has been lost. Orthodox leaders, such as Athanasius, are depicted in such accounts as power-hungry and spiritually blind. The Nag Hammadi texts were buried away for posterity, ie, for *us*. The codices take readers back to a Christianity before the “Dark Ages,” Crusades and the Inquisition. These forgotten forms of early Christianity in them come from within the Christian matrix, but are distinct from the normative tradition associated with the creeds, councils, and New Testament. These alternate Christianities were branded *heretical*. But αἵρεσις (*heresy*) in its original form means choice, option, or school, and this is precisely how contemporary readers approach them today: as (new) options within the Christian tradition. Such a narrative responds to religious desires in the west, particularly America, in ways tales of a rich Gnostic collector or a dying man hedging his afterlife bets cannot. The indeterminacy of the objective fact is established into a meaningful past. History becomes memory.¹¹

In the study that follows, I examine that ways in which the codices Muhammad Ali discovered one wintry morning in 1945 have been received as *religious documents*.¹² My concern is not the history of the texts themselves, but with the ways in which their impact has been felt in American religion and culture. In the terms of historian Jan Assmann, I argue that the Nag Hammadi Library has been received as a “return of the repressed” cultural memory.¹³ Texts that had been deemed heretical to early orthodox Christianity were buried (repressed) and rediscovered 1500 years later (the return).

¹⁰ This is not to say that the Pachomian origins story is implausible. See Jenott & Lundhaug, *The Monastic Origins of the Nag Hammadi Codices* for the most recent and thorough argument for this position. My own position is that it is somewhat problematic, but no more so than any of the other explanations. What is important for my argument is that emotional attachment and potential meaning have guided the reception of the Nag Hammadi Codices whether the positions are sound or not.

¹¹ The distinction between history and memory has become one of the most contentious academic debates of the 21st century. A journal – *History and Memory* – is even devoted to the topic. My own use of the term “memory” derives from that used by thinkers dependent on the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics, most especially Jan and Aleida Assmann’s theoretical approach to *cultural memory* (see J Assmann *Moses the Egyptian*; *idem Cultural Memory and Western Civilization*; *idem Religion and Cultural Memory*; *idem* 2011. A Assmann 2011a; *idem* 2011b).

Cultural memory encompasses the ways individuals and/or groups meaningfully relate to symbols, texts, and figures from the past. Cultural memory is distinct from social memory insofar as it is not dependent on relatively ephemeral oral tradition and does not presume a shared conception of the past within a group. Cultural memory encompasses reproductions and interpretations of the past in sacred texts and ritual, but also in mass media, literature and entertainment. The present is determined in “dialectic” with its past. As will be shown throughout this book, what is often referred to as *objective history* produced within the academy is quickly absorbed into cultural memory and becomes a new resource for meaning and orientation. See also Gadamer, *Truth and Method*; Shils, *Tradition*; Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*; Ricouer, *Memory, History, Forgetting*; Eril *Memory in Culture*.

¹² Research into the religious reception of the Nag Hammadi library is only now beginning. See: Smith, “Afterword”; *idem* “The Revival of Ancient Gnosis”; Burns “New Age and Neo-Gnostic Commentaries on the Gospel of Thomas”; Dillon, “Symbolic Loss, Memory, and Modernization”; *idem.*, “The Impact of Scholarship on Contemporary ‘Gnosticisms.’”

¹³ Assmann *Moses and Monotheism*, 217-218; *idem Religion and Cultural Memory*, 180-81.

The psychoanalytic analogy further illuminates the dynamics of the library's religious reception. A repressed memory does not re-appear in pristine form, like a piece of film that objectively captures the past.¹⁴ It is a compromise between the repressed content and conscious awareness. The meaning of the memory is in its interpretation. In this analogy, the meaning of the NHL to contemporary Americans is not wholly dependent on the texts themselves. Nor is the meaning exclusively located in the reader. The meaning of the texts and the self-understanding of the readers, the remembered past and the sense of the present, are all transformed within the hermeneutic circle.¹⁵

Recognizing its status as a "return of the repressed" is the key to understanding the Nag Hammadi library's religious reception. Both religious traditions and individuals require narrative coherence to formulate an identity.¹⁶ Identity arises out of a meaningful narrative linking episodes and events of the life history together. No episode is intrinsically meaningful. Retrospective interpretation is required to plot each experience into a narrative. Experiences that are irrelevant to or challenge the narrative identity are forgotten.¹⁷ But the return of a forgotten or repressed memory provokes a crisis in consciousness. The narrative identity has to be rewritten in order to accommodate the forgotten memories – or the memories have to be repressed again, forcibly walled off from the tradition/identity as currently understood. Reception of the NHL cannot be traced like a foreign thinker or body of thought, such as Nietzsche or Tibetan Buddhism, because the NHL impacts our understanding of the origins of Christianity.¹⁸ The library destabilizes tradition. It modifies the Christian past and, so doing, rewrites present forms of Christianity.

¹⁴ Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (1939). Found in *Complete Works*, 4900-4924.

¹⁵ The relationship between the hermeneutic circle and reception is implicit in Gadamer's concept of tradition. Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, 293. "The circle, then, is not formal in nature. It is neither subjective nor objective, but describes understanding as the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter. The anticipation of meaning that governs our understanding of a text is not an act of subjectivity, but proceeds from the commonality that binds us to the tradition. But this commonality is constantly being formed in our relation to tradition. Tradition is not simply a permanent precondition; rather, we produce it ourselves inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition, and hence further determine it ourselves." See also 291-311 (on reception), 341-362 (on fusion of the horizons and its alteration of historically effected consciousness), and 395-405 (on the impact of interpretation on the past and present as a dyad).

¹⁶ On narrative as essential to identity within a tradition, see: Shils *Tradition*, 5-51; Assmann *Moses and Monotheism*, 14-15; idem 2006, 1-16 and 86-91. On individual identity, personal narrative, and psychoanalysis, see especially: McAdams *Identity and Story: Creating the Self in Narrative*; Ricouer, *Time and Narrative* (3 Vols); Freeman, *Rewriting the Self: History, Memory, Narrative*..

¹⁷ On "forgetting" in memory, see: Ricouer *History, Memory, Forgetting*, 412-456.

¹⁸ For Nietzsche, see Ratner-Rosenhagen's extraordinary *American Nietzsche*, 2011. On Tibetan Buddhism, see Lopez *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, 1988 and Paine *Re-Enchantment: Tibetan Buddhism comes to the West*, 2004.

Analysis of the religious reception of the NHL may therefore be divided into the two primary features: the repressed memory and the mind to which it returns, i.e., the ways in which the Nag Hammadi library impacts understandings of Christian origins (ancient history) for those living in America after its discovery (present). In what follows, I divide these dimensions into what I call the “politics of memory” and the “meaning of memory.”

The Politics of Memory¹⁹

One of the most significant insights of memory studies is the relationship between power and origin stories.²⁰ Whether national or religious, origin stories feature events and symbols that legitimize those currently in positions of power. Hierarchies of authority in the imagined past are keyed to hierarchies in the present.²¹ Gender norms and duties are also legitimized by historical memory, as the reception of the Adam and Eve Genesis narrative makes clear.²² Ritual commemorations of the remembered past, such as the Eucharist, place individuals within a historical tradition and identify them with a broad community.²³ By doing so, the rituals reinforce the power structures already in place.

Moreover, the institutional memory often contains events or groups that symbolize failed subversion: Bar Kochba in traditional Judaism and the Gnostics in traditional Christianity are paradigmatic examples. Contemporary holders of a tradition key these historical subversives to transgressive groups in their own time to delegitimize them. In the strongest possible sense, then, the practices, social authority, and scriptures of religious traditions are legitimized within their origin narratives. So long as this institutional memory (upheld by the organized tradition, such as Catholicism) is coextensive with the broader cultural memory (the understanding of the past held in the culture-at-large) of the imagined past, institutional power will not be challenged.

Institutional memory, however, is subject to challenge. *Counter-memories* offer alternative readings of the past that challenge the legitimacy and authority of institutional

¹⁹ This term is derived from Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, 25.

²⁰ Hobswam, “Introduction,” *The Invention of Tradition*; Hammer and Lewis, “Introduction,” *The Invention of Sacred Tradition*; Smith, “Differential Equation,” 243-44; idem, “What a Difference a Difference Makes,” 252-254; Lincoln *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, 13-52; idem *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars*, 5-15 and 53-62; Astril *Memory in Culture*. Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*..

²¹ Lincoln *Discourse*, 30-36; idem *Gods and Demons*, 5-15; Zerubavel *Recovered Roots*, 10-12.

²² Norris, *Eve: A Biography*; Kvam and Scheering, *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender*.

²³ Assmann *Religion and Cultural Memory*, 9-16; Lincoln *Discourse and the Construction*, 53-75; JZ Smith, “Differential Equations,” 241-243.

power.²⁴ To take a simple but telling example, if the institutional memory that Jesus of Nazareth experienced substantial resurrection and appeared to followers is deemed false, then traditional authority dependent on these appearances is unfounded. The *kerygma* is empty.

Counter-memories are revisions of paradigmatic figures and events in the past.²⁵ Often this comes in the form of an *inversion*, where the powerless outsiders are revisioned as the powerful insiders, or the heretic is made the true believer. Alternately, the hierarchy embedded in the origin story might be reorganized based upon the newly imagined past. Or finally, what had been accepted as a legitimate symbol of institutional authority, such as the New Testament, may itself be challenged and replaced by another symbol from the remembered past, such as a new collection of scriptures. It cannot be overstressed that these counter-memories are created and function *within* the tradition. Their designation as counter or deviant requires the norm from which they deviate.

The discovery of the Nag Hammadi codices has served to authorize the production of a torrent of Christian counter-memories. The codices are seen by many as material witnesses to the early Christian past, *before* the organization of orthodoxy, councils and creeds. Readings from them serve to legitimize alternative forms of Christian belief and practice that were repressed in the concatenation of tradition. In the terms of cultural memory, they *frame* their present situation in America in the terms of the early Christian landscape reflected in the texts of the NHL.²⁶ Individuals and groups *key* their own experiences to specific groups in the past, such as the Gnostics or Christians as “heretics.”²⁷ Once the frame has been established, the NHL is used as a resource for *inversion* of cultural memory: the Gnostics are remembered as the *true* Christians vis-à-vis the false witnesses of tradition. Mary Magdalene, for so long mis-remembered as a prostitute, becomes not only an apostle, but the first and most influential leader of the early church. The life, work, and message of Jesus are reimagined in numerous ways through the prism of the Nag Hammadi texts.

What all these reimaginings share is a suspicion of the exclusive authority invested in the orthodox or normative tradition. From many quarters of America – from traditional ministers and Gnostic priests to visual artists – there is a call to reimagine the parameters of Christian practice, to enlarge the canon, and rethink the creeds. In each instance these counter-memories subvert

²⁴ J Assmann *Moses and Monotheism*, 10-12; Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 150-157; Lincoln, *Discourse*, 30-36; Zerubavel *Recovered Roots*, 10-12.

²⁵ Lincoln, *Discourse*, 23-24 and 30-36.

²⁶ Schwartz, “Memory as a Cultural System,” 911.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 911-912.

traditional authority. They do so not merely to disparage the Christian tradition (although some do that), but to reimagine the Christian past in such a way as it can become meaningful to those living in the present.

The Sociology of Memory

The first English language accounts of the Nag Hammadi find reached America in 1953.²⁸ When translations of *The Gospel of Thomas*, *The Gospel of Truth*, and Jean Doresse's *Secret Book of the Egyptian Gnostics* appeared in 1959-1960 the library itself received a small wave of press coverage. It was not until the mid 1970's that the Nag Hammadi Library began to receive major attention in periodicals like the Los Angeles Times and crossover books like John Dart's *The Laughing Savior*.²⁹ When the full English translation appeared in late 1977 all major newspapers published reviews.³⁰ Meditations on the find and its meaning – most notably Elaine Pagels' *The Gnostic Gospels* – were widely read.³¹ In the years since, the popularity and influence of the Nag Hammadi Library has only increased.³²

This timeframe is significant. The Nag Hammadi codices arrived in America during a period of massive culture transition. All but three texts only appeared after the flourishing of the 1960's counterculture.³³ Women's liberation and the sexual revolution were well under-way.³⁴ Immigration from non-European continents boomed after the Immigration Act of 1965, and texts from world religions became better known with the growth of Departments of Comparative Religions.³⁵ Capitalism and the market economy, always a condition of American consciousness, reached its most extreme expression in the neoliberal economic policies instituted by the Reagan

²⁸ "Gnostic Gospels of 150 AD Found; Throw Light on Early Christianity," New York Times, Nov 16, 1953.

²⁹ Substantial bibliography for Dart found in chapter 1.

³⁰ List of reviews here.

³¹ Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*.

³² It was not until the 2000's that books by Pagels and Ehrman reached New York Times best-seller status. *The Da Vinci Code*'s unparalleled popularity brought a new wave of attention to the texts. Cable documentaries such as *Finding Jesus*, with references to *The Gospel of Thomas* and *The Gospel of Mary*, reached millions of viewers.

³³ Roszak, *The Making of a Counterculture*; Elwood, *The Sixties Spiritual Awakening*; Davis, "The Counterculture and the Occult," 645-655.

³⁴ On Women's liberation, see: May, *America and the Pill*; Kerber, *Women's America*; Berkeley, *The Women's Liberation Movement in America*. On the sexual revolution in America, see: Allen, *Make Love, Not War: The Sexual Revolution, an Unfettered History*; Altman, *Global Sex*.

³⁵ On the growth of Religious Studies departments in the 1960's and its relationship to the counterculture, see: Lincoln *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars*, 132-135; Kripal, *Serpent's Gift*, 108-114; Idem, *Comparing Religions*, 67-73.

administration.³⁶

The inundated market of late Capitalism fosters a consumer mindset in all matters.

³⁷Choice, novelty, and individual agency are prioritized over tradition and community in order to keep the engine of neoliberalism humming. Shifting media – from network television to cable and satellite; DOS desktops to wireless internet and smartphones – fundamentally altered American exposure to alternative lifestyles abroad and at home. Pen-pals in China in 1980 could be Skype-pals in 2010. In sum, the Nag Hammadi Library arrived at a moment when suspicion of tradition in all its forms was the rule, marginalized voices began to have a political impact, and stress on individualism and choice reached their zenith in America.

Within the sphere of American religions, all of these social and technological shifts brought a crisis of traditional authority. Sociologists such as Peter Berger and Peter Homans have articulated how processes of modernization (e.g., secularization, pluralization, disenchantment, technologization) challenge traditional Christianity.³⁸ The Christian “sacred canopy,” a horizon of shared symbolic meanings undergirding western culture, had been left in tatters. Exposure to alternate religious worldviews challenged the self-evident facticity of creedal Christianity. Scientific understandings of the cosmos rendered enchanted narratives like Genesis or Christ’s resurrection un-believable. Civil rights, the sexual revolution, and feminism challenged traditional gender and moral norms. Rationalization in the form of biblical criticism destabilized the bedrock of scriptural Protestantism (*sola fide, sola scriptura, sola gratia*). The celebration of novelty and choice undergirded by capitalism is in fundamental tension with conservative notions of traditional authority.

Statistics on American religious membership reflect the impact of the processes of modernization. Mainline and liberal Christian denominations have shrunk since the 1960’s.³⁹

³⁶ The standard work on neo-Liberalism remains Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*.

³⁷ According to Jessop, “Neoliberalism,” “neoliberalism is a political project that is justified on philosophical grounds and seeks to extend competitive market forces, consolidate a market-friendly constitution, and promote individual freedom.” Late Capitalism is the term used to denote the form of market capitalism that has developed since the late 1970’s with the increasing adoption of neoliberal economic policies in America and western Europe. Features of late capitalism include an infusion of options into the market, the diminishing political power of unions, and the international export of factories and jobs. See: Jessop, “Neoliberalism”; Springer, Birch, MacLeavy, “An Introduction to Neoliberalism”; Duménil and Lévy, “The Crisis of Neoliberalism.”

³⁸ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*; idem *The Homeless Mind*; idem *Rumors of Angels*; and especially idem, *The Heretical Imperative*; Homans, *Jung in Context*, chapters 6 and 8; idem, *The Ability to Mourn*, “Part Three”; idem “Loss and Mourning in the Life and Thought of Max Weber: Towards a Theory of Symbolic Loss”; idem, “Symbolic Loss and the Recreation of Meaning: Freud and Eliade as Culture-Makers.”

³⁹ The new standard work on this topic is Jones, *The End of White Christian America*; based on an aggregate of Gallup polls conducted in 2016, the percentage of respondents in America who identified as “Protestant” has dropped from 70% in 1961 to 38% in 2015. See <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1690/religion.aspx>.

The number of Catholics has also decreased.⁴⁰ The only forms of Christianity to grow over that timeframe are Mormonism and those Protestant forms classified as Evangelical.⁴¹ While “Evangelical” is a multivalent signifier, it connotes conservative responses to modernization: maintenance of traditional gender and moral norms; suspicion (if not outright dismissal) of Biblical criticism; assertion of creedal Christianity’s truth against other religions, world or new; and a suspicion of the ways choice and the celebration of the individual challenge traditional authority. In short, an aversion to modernization is intrinsic to Evangelical Christianity.

Tracing the reception of the NHL in this period of social and religious transformation reveals something extraordinary. Those who turn to these texts are so often those who found it necessary to break from organized and traditional forms of Christianity. Just as often, their reasons for doing so mark the fissures between traditional Christianity and the shifts in modernity. They had become religiously “homeless.”⁴² And yet these individuals did not find solace in scientific rationalism or alternative religions. They sought re-connection to the Christian symbolic. In Homans’ terms, they had experienced symbolic loss: the “death” of a symbol or groups of symbols that had once been attached to and provided meaning, orientation, and social belonging.⁴³ Reading the Nag Hammadi codices, these individuals found a way to reinterpret the symbols of Christianity with the modern American context. They found a feminist icon in Mary Magdalene. They found in the historical Gnostics a form of Christian practice that did not just tolerate, but embraced religious and cultural diversity. They found a Jesus who was not a “king” to whom they had to be “subjects,” but a democratic leader encouraging each individual to find their own personal divinity. And they found early Christians who were suspicious of the political power implicit in canon formation that legitimized their efforts to open Christian ecclesiology and the canon to radical new formulations. In short, the authors, religious

⁴⁰ The drop in registered Catholics has been attenuated by immigration patterns from Latin America. On the infusion of Latin American Catholics, see Pew Research Center, “Changing Faiths: Latinos and the Transformation of American Religion (2007).”

⁴¹ Cf Gallup aggregate, note 35.

⁴² The term is Peter Berger’s. To be “homeless” refers to a sense of alienation or deracination from any traditional source of meaning. “The “homelessness” of modern social life has found its most devastating expression in the area of religion. The general uncertainty, brought about by the pluralization of everyday life and of biography in modern society, has brought religion into a serious crisis of plausibility. The age-old function of religion – to provide ultimate certainty amidst the exigencies of the human condition – has been severely shaken.” Berger, *The Homeless Mind*, 184-185.

⁴³ See Homans, “Loss and Mourning” and “Symbolic Loss and the Recreation of Meaning.” Homans uses “attachment” in its technical, psychoanalytic sense (e.g. Bowlby, Main, Fonagy). However, this use simply gives theoretical heft and nuance to the notion of symbolic attachment that already exists within *traditionsgeschichtliche*, for example Shils, *Tradition*, 50-54.

leaders, and artists analyzed in the pages that follow look to the NHL as the source of a new, heretical revival that reinterprets the Christian past in order to rewrite its present.

Mapping the Terrain

Each chapter traces the reception of one symbol of Christian memory within the American context. Chapter one, “Jesus and the Nag Hammadi Library,” establishes how the impact of *The Gospel of Thomas* on historical Jesus research was felt in the reception of the NHL in American religion and culture more generally. Several counter-memories are explored: the secular Jesus of the Jesus Seminar; Jesus the eastern guru of Osho and John Newman; the mystical mythicism of Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy; the sexual Jesus of *The Da Vinci Code*; Lewis Keizer’s Kaballistic Yeshua; and Jonathan Talat Phillips’ Neo-Shamanic Jesus. In each case the originators distinguished their counter-memories from how they see the orthodox Jesus of the creeds. Yet the “orthodox” here is a shifting signifier. Some counter Evangelical fundamentalism, others disavow Catholicism, while still others are fighting against the historical Jesuses being produced by the “orthodox” academy. In each case, though, these authors deliver their counter-memory in a way that realigns Jesus to modern America.

Chapter two analyzes the ways in which the Nag Hammadi Library has led to the celebration of “lost” and “alternative” Christianities. Until the find of the NHL, the Gnostics were almost exclusively known through heresiologists such as Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Epiphanius. With the NHL the Gnostics were finally able to “speak for themselves.”⁴⁴ First, the Gnostics are conceived as the source of an “inner” or “esoteric” Christianity. According to figures such as Gilles Quispel and Stephan Hoeller, this form of Christianity survived as an underground stream in the west, but is now re-appearing in dramatic form. Second, the Gnostics are conceived of as Christian heretics who practiced “alternative Christianities.” The work of Elaine Pagels is paramount here. Her portrayal of the Gnostics presents heresy not as a sociological category, not a theological one. The Gnostics were the losers of a power-struggle within early Christianity that the so-called orthodox won. The NHL allows their forms of Christianity to be revived.

Chapter three, “Gnosticism to Post-Gnosticism,” analyzes the ways in which Gnostics have been conceived as individuals openly hostile to orthodox Christianity. I analyze the ways in

⁴⁴ Pagels, *The Gnostics Gospels*, xxv.

which authors residing in what Colin Campbell has labeled the “cultic milieu” valorize the Gnostics as comparable counter-cultural figures in the past. Authors like Philip K. Dick, Grant Morrison, and John Lamb Lash take the NHL as evidence of a creative, mystical, and transgressive approach to Christian symbols that has long been lost. In new media (zines and podcasts) a new, complex form of American Gnosticism is forming that approaches the NHL as scripture alongside the works of Philip K Dick, Carl Jung, and films like *The Matrix*.

Mary Magdalene is the subject of my fourth chapter. Perhaps no symbol has been so thoroughly revised by newly discovered texts as Mary Magdalene. For so long mis-remembered for the prostitute in Luke 7:36-50, her presentation in the gospels of Mary, Thomas, and Phillip has led to a radical revision. She is considered by many an important voice in the early church, even the apostle whom Jesus loved more than any other. The hierarchy of authority between Peter and Mary gets inverted. She is a visionary and religious genius in her own right. Or she might be remembered now as Jesus’s wife and the mother of his child. And last, she has come to represent the divine feminine in early Christianity, an avatar coequal to and balancing that of Jesus. This chapter analyzes how these new memories reflect the shifting discourses of feminism and the work of its champions in the study of early Christianity. Moreover, it considers how the serendipitous publication of this text at the same time birth control was invented and a majority of women began to seek work outside the home helped to politicize these texts and Mary Magdalene’s memory.

Taken together, the revisions and inversions of memory relating to Jesus, the Gnostics, and Mary Magdalene challenge the authority of the western church’s traditional memory. My conclusion examines how the NHL has impacted individuals and churches that self-identify as mainstream Christian. Many church leaders find the project of Christian memory revision unsettling. In documentaries, monographs, and interviews, religious leaders offer a new form of apologetics. Evangelicals and Catholics assert their orthodox views of Christian origins vis-à-vis their critics. Gnostics and Mary Magdalene are returned to their traditional places. Jesus of the creeds and the New Testament retain their authority. As I show, this literature functions as a kind of neo-heresiology. These new heresies are confronted as another front in the American “culture wars.”⁴⁵ Revisionists of memory are pilloried for using the Christian symbolic to camouflage political causes like religious and cultural pluralism, scientific rationalism, historicism and moral

⁴⁵ See Prothero, *Why Liberals Win the Culture Wars (Even When They Lose Elections)*, especially “The Contemporary Culture Wars.”

relativism. To preserve a conservative American worldview, these church leaders assert that Christian authority must be maintained.

In conclusion, I offer three reflections that speak to concerns of both historians of American religions and historians of religions more generally.

One, since the 1960's it has been taken for granted that liberal forms of Christianity have shrunk in influence and sheer numbers. Declining church membership and shifting affiliation in religious census, particularly the growth of the "nones" in recent decades, are cited as evidence.⁴⁶ My analysis calls this into question. If American historians consider religious identity as something more than personal signification or membership, it is possible to notice unique forms of Christianity developing within new religions and the unchurched.

Second, I propose that no hard distinction can be made between historical scholarship and memory. Scholarship has played not a, but *the* formative role in the reception of the NHL as religious documents. In part, this is simply due to competence. Few laypersons read Coptic. But what this study exhibits (again and again) is that scholars of early Christianity are pursuing scholarship that, they hope, will help them to revise and reconnect with the Christian tradition. This does *not*, a priori, render their scholarship unsound. It simply recognizes that scholars too are part of American religion and culture, and his or her scholarship will be pursued from his or her position within it. They key the figures of their research to the contemporary situation in their scholarship, the proto-orthodox church to forms of traditional Christianity they find objectionable, and the Gnostics as models for new practices and beliefs. Their readers, motivated by the same religious concerns, then absorb these models and bring the practices and beliefs into action.

Last, as a historian of religions, this study suggests that what Jeremy Carrette calls "disciplinary amnesia" may be clouding our ability to theorize religious origins.⁴⁷ The work of figures like Bruce Lincoln and Russell McCutcheon, which I draw from extensively, does a superlative job of clarifying the political dimensions of memory.⁴⁸ Individuals and groups do use the contested domain of myth to articulate their identities, inscribe politics of difference, and

⁴⁶ On the statistical growth of the "nones," see Pew, "America's Changing Religious Landscape: Christians Decline Sharply as Share of the Population; Unaffiliated and Other Faiths Continue to Grow (2015)."

⁴⁷ Carrette, "Post-Structuralism and the Psychology of Religion," 110-122. Disciplinary amnesia refers to the ways in which authors, ideas, and concerns within a discipline are forgotten as new techniques and concerns come to take hold. At times this is necessary. At other times, however, it is simply a matter of the power dynamics implicit within a discipline, with "new" interests finding easier placement in journals and scholars producing work on them finding tenure. The amnesia makes itself known when the blind spots of the new method or theory require new forms of analysis, which so often resuscitate thinkers and ideas who lost popularity during the most recent cultural fashion.

⁴⁸ McCutcheon, "Myth," in *Guide to the Study of Religion*; Lincoln, *Discourse*, 13-52.

construct discourses that legitimize power relations. But that is only one side of the coin. Issues of meaning, attachment, and affect were central to theories of religious origins and symbols put forward by notable scholars like Mircea Eliade, Clifford Geertz, and Gananath Obeyesekere.⁴⁹ The cultural fashion of critical theory seems to have led to a disciplinary amnesia. This study shows, in real-time, that individuals are revising stories of origins for more than political ends. They seek ways of reconnecting with Christian symbols emptied of their power by the forces of modernization. Through the revision of mythic origins, they are once again able to develop meaningful attachments to these symbols. In short, the politics and sociology of memory, or power and meaning, cannot be separated. Agents of change seek to challenge the tradition and to reconnect to it. To focus on one or the other aspect would therefore not just limit, but fundamentally distort the very reception history this book traces. The same should hold true for further studies of religious origins.

⁴⁹ See especially Eliade, *Myth and Reality*; idem, *Images and Symbols*; idem, *Myths, Dreams, and Other Realities*. Geertz's essay "Religion as a Cultural System" and its notion of symbolic-interactionism are also essential. Obeyesekere's *The Work of Culture*, in my view, remains the most nuanced approach to individual psyches and their attachments to the social symbolic.

Chapter 1: Jesus and the Nag Hammadi

“To see how Americans of all stripes have cast the man from Nazareth in their own image is to examine, through the looking glass, the kaleidoscopic character of American culture.” ~ Stephen Prothero¹

“The aim of the quest is to set Jesus free. Its purpose is to liberate Jesus from the scriptural and creedal and experiential prisons in which we have incarcerated him. What would happen if ‘the dangerous and subversive memories’ of that solitary figure were really stripped of their interpretive overlay? . . . The Pale, anemic, iconic Jesus would suffer by comparison with the stark realism of the genuine article.” ~ Robert Funk²

In one of the first American newspaper articles on the Nag Hammadi find, “The Unknown Sayings: The Truth about the Lost ‘Fifth Gospel’ of Jesus,” journalist Manuel Komroff of the Washington Post intuited the library’s subsequent American reception.³ Henri PeuchPuech, his primary interview subject, focused on the impact the find would have on our understanding of the historical Jesus. PeuchPuech explained how *Thomas* contains many Jesus sayings parallel to those found in the canonical gospels. But it also contained dozens of new sayings, eight of which were published in English for the first time in this article. Komroff concludes his story on an almost benedictory note:

“As the clay was shattered and the words found light, [Jesus] spoke again as He had once spoke of old. Once more, He comes to us as He came long ago to those who waited for Him on the Mount or at the Sea of Galilee. Once more he speaks to us words that lighten the yoke which weighs upon us. He speaks again as He spoke of old – with simplicity, understanding, and love.”

Komroff’s article conveys something fundamental about the reception of the NHCNag Hammadi Codices in America. The news is what the find can do to reframe the historical Jesus. Of all the texts available, Komroff focuses on *Thomas*. Through *Thomas*, Jesus can “speak again as he spoke of old.” Tracing the religious reception of the NHCNag Hammadi codices, it becomes clear Komroff was right: many Americans felt a need to hear Jesus to speak again. As

¹ Prothero, *The American Jesus*, 7.

² Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, 300.

³ Komroff, April 7, 1957.

mainline denominations began to lose members at an unprecedented rate, Evangelical forms of Protestant Christianity would stake their claim preserving the traditional Jesus of the creeds: fully human and divine, member of the Trinity, whose life was accurately recounted by the canonical gospels. It is this America that the Jesus – or, more aptly, the Jesuses – unearthed in the NHC would speak to. The Jesus found in the NHC Nag Hammadi Codices would instead speak to those in America for whom the Jesus of the creeds was no longer tenable.

The Jesuses of the Nag Hammadi would encourage readers to reimagine a historical Jesus *before* the church and canon obscured him. These alternative memories would vary a great deal. Jesus would become the prophet of Jewish wisdom, a mHindu mystic whose teachings draw from the religions of India, a father, a Kabbalistic magician, and a myth. Orthodox forms of Christianity – mainline, Evangelical, and Catholic – have argued against the veracity or authenticity of these new readings of Jesus since 1959.⁴ More is at stake than readings and interpretations. Numerous American-Christian sects and denominations have offered counter-memories before and after the discovery of the Nag Hammadi cache, from Jesus’ ministering to the Native Americans in *The Book of Mormon* to Helen Schucman’s channeled Jesus of *A Course in Miracles*. The NHC Nag Hammadi Codices, however, reopened early Christian memory to an unprecedented re-envisioning. The *Nag Hammadi Library* provides those who want to revise Christian memory a sense of historical plausibility/legitimacy.: Eminent scholars such as Helmut Koester have argued that some some parts of these texts, especially *The Gospel of Thomas*, are as old as the canonical gospels and may preserve Jesus traditions that were excluded from canon because they contradict later orthodoxy.⁵ In a culture conditioned by a historiographic *episteme*, the NHC Nag Hammadi Codices ~~can~~ is used to validate and legitimize counter-myths of Christian origins in ways new revelations imagined narratives or channeled works simply cannot.⁶ Moreover, the NHC Nag Hammadi Codices calls into question the very authority of canon and apostolic succession upon which traditional memories are based.

Komroff’s benedictory conclusion also hints that that how the newly discovered Jesus is responding to will be used by authors in this chapter to respond to symbolic loss within

⁴ Kenneth Dole, April 4, 1959. “‘Gospel of Thomas’ Stirs Discussion.”

⁵ Koester, “Gnomai Diaphoroi,” esp 135-138.

⁶ I use *episteme* in the Foucauldian sense. See Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 191: [episteme refers to] “the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalized systems.” The episteme provides the “fundamental codes of culture” and the “conditions of possibility.” Historiography here is understood as an expression of the scientific *episteme* in its relationship to history. Religious assertions of truth *must* be couched in historiographic discourse in order to achieve validity. Foucault here is of course merely “thinking through” Nietzsche’s *The Use and Abuse of History*.

American culture. As analysisAnalysis of the lives and writings of those who produce such reinterpretations of Jesus through the NHC show, these novel readings of the historical Jesus are often produced in response to symbolic loss. Figures such as Robert Funk, Dan Brown, and Jonathan Talat Phillips all make clear how they turned to the NHCNag Hammadi Codices after the processes of modernization had challenged their inherited faith.

Jesus and the Reception of the Codices before The Nag Hammadi Library in English

Beginning in 1959, translations, studies, and editions of *The Gospel of Thomas* were published in English and available to a popular audience.⁷ Reception throughout the 1960's, however, was subdued. In large measure this can be attributed to the early branding of *Thomas* as a "gnostic" gospel whose sayings were dependent upon knowledge of the canonical gospels. Seminal early Christianity scholars such as Robert M. Grant, Bertil Gartner, and H.E.W. Turner each made the case *Thomas* was a late text dependent on the New Testament gospels.⁸ As a 1959 Washington Post article concludes, "the new manuscripts do not challenge the wisdom of those who accepted the Gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John for the official canon."⁹

Two scholars, Helmut Koester and James M. Robinson, together would challenge this assumption and open a new quest for the historical Jesus. Before establishing himself as the key figure in the publication of the NHCNag Hammadi Codices, Robinson was a theologian concerned with historical Jesus research.¹⁰ His first foray into the codices was, unsurprisingly, an analysis of the logoi of *Thomas*. and Robinson argued that how the newly discovered text provides new evidence of Jesus' rhetorical strategies.¹¹ Koester, a leading scholar of New Testament at Harvard, similarly entered research on the NHCNag Hammadi Codices through *Thomas*. He took note that *Thomas* seemed to contain more "primitive" versions of Jesus sayings found in the gospels, and also contained sayings (such as the parable of the assassin) that betrayed the form and wit of the historical Jesus.¹² Together, the two would assemble their essays of the 1960's into the book *Trajectories through Early Christianity*.¹³

⁷ PeuchPuech, Quispel et al., *Evangelium Veritatis; The Gospel According to Thomas*; Grant, *The Secret Sayings of Jesus*.

⁸ Grant and Freedman 1960*Secret Sayings*; Gartner 1961*Theology According to Thomas*.; Turner 1962.

⁹ Washington Post, April 4, 1959, Kenneth Dole "N of the Churches: 'Gospel of Thomas' Stirs Discussion."

¹⁰ Robinson, *A New Quest for the Historical Jesus*.

¹¹ Robinson, "Logoi Sophon: On the Gattung of Q," in *Trajectories*.

¹² Koester, "Gnomai Diaphoroi," esp 135-138.

¹³ Robinson and Koester, 1971*Trajectories in Early Christianity*.

The import and influence of this pair of scholars is difficult to overestimate. *Trajectories* is one of the canonical works of New Testament studies, and much more will be said about it in a later chapter. Suffice it to note Robinson and Koester introduced many in the world of Anglophone scholarship to Walter Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Early Christianity*, which did not receive an English translation until 1971.¹⁴ Bauer argued that clear divisions between what we now call orthodoxy and heresy were not in place in the first centuries of Christianity. Different forms of Christian belief and practice developed throughout the Mediterranean. Only after those labeling themselves "orthodox" became dominant would other forms of Christianity be labeled "heresy."

Robinson and Koester immediately recognized the application of Bauer's thesis to the Nag Hammadi codices. Moreover, since gospels were products of the beliefs of distinctive early Christian communities, the search for the historical Jesus cannot leave out so-called apocryphal texts on the grounds that they offer distorted witness. All witnesses are distorted. The latter may be every bit as illuminating as the canonical gospels. Lastly, Robinson and Koester would train and supervise the majority of scholars who began to work on the English translations and critical editions of the codices. Robinson's team at Claremont would train Stephen Patterson, Charles Hedrick, Marvin Meyer, Robert Miller, and Rod Parrot. James Brashler, Birger Pearson, Douglass Parrott, and John Turner were also affiliated with the institute. Koester trained Elaine Pagels, Bentley Layton, Ron Cameron, and Harold Attridge while working at Harvard with George MacRae. These scholars would have a hand in 34 of the 47 texts in the original *Nag Hammadi Library in English*.

John Dart, a journalist for the *Los Angeles Times*, became the first messenger carrying to carry scholarly insights into the codices to the public. Beginning with his 1971 article "Gnostic Papyri Shed New Light on Heresy," Dart would publish over twenty articles on the Nag Hammadi Codices.¹⁵ His *The Laughing Savior: The Discovery and Significance of the Nag Hammadi Gnostic Library* (1976) was the first popular book-length account of the find and its contents. Located in Los Angeles, Dart had maintained collegial relationships with the scholars working at the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity at Claremont University and, in the

¹⁴ Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Early Christianity*. Trans. Kraft and Krodol. Originally *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum*, 1934.

¹⁵ A comprehensive list of Dart articles on the Nag Hammadi is available here: http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/latimes/results.html?st=advanced&QryTxt=nag+hammadi&&sortby=RELEVANCE&datetype=0&frommonth=12&fromday=04&fromyear=1881&tomonth=12&today=31&toyear=1988&By=john+dart&Title=&at_curr=ALL&type=historic&start=0

1980's, the scholars of the Jesus Seminar. Dart even joined the Society of Biblical Literature in 1979, delivered papers on the Nag Hammadi Library, and served on panels concerned with conveying biblical scholarship to the public.

Dart had a knack for pinpointing what made the NHC Nag Hammadi Codices newsworthy to a wider public. Before the full translation was published, Dart drew public attention to the portrayals of Jesus, the impact of *Thomas* and other texts on historical Jesus research, and the ways Gnostic theology within the NHC Nag Hammadi Codices served as a foil in the development of orthodox doctrine.¹⁶ His relationship with Claremont is evident. James Robinson, Pearson, Hedrick, Parrot, Brashler, Koester, and Pagels all gave interviews for his pieces.¹⁷ Under the influence of Bauer, all of these scholars read the Nag Hammadi codices to reimagine early Christian history. They posited an early dating for certain *Thomas* logia, argued Gnosticism was a pre-Christian religion, and – most importantly – asserted valuable early Christian beliefs may have been lost in the consolidation of Orthodoxy. Through Dart, these views were transmitted to readers throughout the 1970's.

The Laughing Jesus synthesized the research in Dart's earlier articles while also going far past them. Written with support of a journalism fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Dart balanced research in the stacks of Stanford's Green Library with interviews from scholars working at Claremont. Robinson and other scholars from the institute, such as Birger Pearson, et al provided Dart with pre-publication translations of the codices, short descriptions and analyses of each text, and research suggestions. In essence, Dart became the primary agent of knowledge transfer for early Nag Hammadi Library research.¹⁸ While the book does a laudable job of piecing together the details of the find and history of the NHC Nag Hammadi Codices, Dart focuses on the implications these findings have for public understanding of early Christianity.

¹⁶ See e.g. Dart, John "Gnostic Papyri Shed New Light on Ancient Heresy (1971)," "Striking Sayings of Jesus Told in Ancient Egyptian Manuscripts (1973)," "Long Lost Gnostic Writings Cast Jesus in a New Light (1975)," "Christianity's Male Orientation Studied," "Scholar Champions 'Gospel of Thomas': Says It May Be Among Earliest Writings on 'Historical Jesus' (1978).

¹⁷ Brashler in "Long Lost Gnostic Writings;" Koester "Scholar Champions 'Gospel of Thomas';" MacRae "Serpent Plays Hero's Role in Gnostic Garden of Eden (1973); Pagels "Christianity's Male Orientation Studied (1977)" and "Book on Gnosticism Wins Honors, Stirs Controversy (1980)." James Robinson is quoted extensively in *The Laughing Jesus*.

¹⁸ Knowledge Transfer "concerns the points of interaction between academic and popular reception; in particular the educational and informative processes taking place primarily (or ostensibly) in the direction *from* the academic sphere *to* the popular sphere." M.A. Collins, "Examining the Reception and Impact of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Some Possibilities for Future Investigation," 241.

As the title of his book indicates, Dart conveys alternative portrayals of Jesus found in the NHC Nag Hammadi Codices and analyzes how these alternatives are impacting studies of the historical Jesus. Dart divides his analysis into three Jesuses: the historical Jesus; the redeemed redeemer (the idea the savior was initially unconscious of his role on earth and needed to be awakened to this truth); and the laughing Jesus (the “living Jesus” who appears laughing above the crucified Jesus in *The Apocalypse of Peter*, Nag Hammadi Codices VII,3.81.4-82.17). Discussion of *Thomas* includes interviews with Koester and Nicholas Perrin, both of whom see in it an early, independent oral tradition. Koester even asserts such a sayings gospel better captured the *message* of the human Jesus than the canonical gospels. As a sayings collection *Thomas* avoided reinterpreting Jesus’ sayings to legitimize the central message of Orthodoxy: the proclamation of Jesus’ passion and death.¹⁹

Dart conveys the Jesus of *Thomas* as a resource in the search for the historical Jesus to a large reading public: one a Jesus who is neither Messiah nor Son of God, does not resurrect, and proclaims a realized Kingdom of Heaven.²⁰ Under the influence of Birger Pearson, Dart also subscribed to the hypothesis that Gnosticism was a pre-Christian religion. *The Apocalypse of Adam* shows that a Gnostic form of the redeemer myth pre-existed the Christian gospels of Jesus and influenced New Testament treatments, especially the gospel of *John*.²¹ Depictions of the resurrected Jesus as a being of light as witnessed in *The Apocryphon of John* and *The Letter of Peter to Philip* may show the earliest Christian experiences of the resurrection were photic. Followers subsequently interpreted these photic experiences in line with a pre-existing Gnostic redeemer myth.²²

The implication is clear: Gnostic notions influenced the early Christian understandings of Jesus conveyed in the New Testament. In Robinson’s words, “these texts demonstrate the mythological wealth that offbeat Judaism made available to nascent Christianity for expressing the grandeur of Jesus.”²³ Last, the “laughing” Jesus of *The Apocalypse of Peter* shows how the doctrine of bodily death and resurrection of Christ was a source of mockery for certain early Gnostic groups.²⁴ The implication of Dart’s book is unmistakable: the Nag Hammadi codices shows that fundamental tenets of traditional Christology (bodily resurrection, the redemption

¹⁹ Dart 1976 *Laughing Jesus*, 91.

²⁰ Ibid, 95.

²¹ Ibid, 97-103.

²² Ibid 105.

²³ Ibid 103.

²⁴ Ibid

narrative, Messiah) are all being challenged by the NHCare not original to the gospels. The gospels, rather, are dependent on Gnostic conceptions.

Taken together, the influence of Robinson, Koester, and Dart on later reception is massive. Gnostic or apocryphal texts had been discovered before and received comparatively little attention. By emphasizing the diversity of early Christian theology and the potential of these texts for historical Jesus research, these three controlled the conversation surrounding the codices. One can easily imagine how scholars less influenced by Bauer might have trained students to translate and critique the texts. Instead, nearly every hand in the translation project was under their influence. Dart's articles and book conveyed their assessment of the find to a wide audience.

Robert Funk and the Jesus Seminar

Soon after the publication of the *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, Helmut Koester and two colleagues – George MacRae and Robert Funk – brainstormed about how to turn this new wave of historical Jesus research into a group project reach a wider audience. According to Dart, this group met “at least once,” but the project was shelved when primary organizer Funk underwent heart surgery.²⁵ In 1985, Funk would revive this project and christen it the Jesus Seminar. MacRae died that year and Koester declined to participate, but Funk was able to enlist a core group of thirty Jesus scholars, along with another 150 who participated at some point over the Seminar's years of operation (1985-2005).²⁶ It is with the Jesus Seminar that the import of *The Gospel of Thomas* would reach its widest audience and popular culture would be introduced to a powerful alternative-memory of Jesus legitimized by biblical scholars.

Raised Methodist in a small Indiana town, Funk pursued a theological education at Butler University (AB), Christian Theological Seminary (BD/MA), and Vanderbilt (PhD).²⁷ Exposure to historical-criticism challenged his childhood faith: “I discovered that real learning is *agony* – a struggle, a contest with ourselves, with superficial, entrenched ideas. . . Learning the truth about the Christian tradition can be the most agonizing of all exercises.”²⁸ He briefly entered the ministry before abandoning the profession because historical-critical truth seemed at odds with

²⁵ Dart 1988 *Jesus of Heresy and History*, 152.

²⁶ *The Five Gospels* 533-537; Funk 1996, 7.

²⁷ Funk 1996 *Honest to Jesus*, 4-5; “Robert Walter Funk, In Memoriam.”

²⁸ *Ibid.* Funk 1996, 5.

the needs of his congregation.”²⁹ Thereafter Funk taught for many years in seminaries. By the time of his 1976 *Jesus as Precursor*, however, he had come to think any affiliation with the church stunted the growth of an authentic, non-apologetic, and intellectually honest theology.³⁰ He taught the remaining years of his academic career at the University of Montana. Funk retired at the age of 59 in order to transmit the insights of biblical scholarship to the general public through his newly founded Polebridge Press and the Jesus Seminar.³¹

The first meeting of the Jesus Seminar was held October 11-13, 1985.³² Funk described their mission as follows: "We are going to inquire simply, rigorously after the voice of Jesus, after what he really said."³³ The quest for the historical Jesus was hardly new. The division between the Christ of myth and the Jesus of history goes back at least to D.F. Strauss.³⁴ Strauss famously (some would say infamously) argued that the New Testament should be read as a set of myths. They could not be read as literal or historical documents. Scholars would need to read beneath the text to try and uncover the historical Jesus prior to the accretion of myths. What was new with the Jesus Seminar were the methods employed and use of non-canonical texts. Theoretical studies into oral cultures and memory had recently been applied to biblical studies.³⁵ The Seminar pushed this method forward while analyzing *Thomas* alongside of the canonical gospels.

As a separate, non-canonical witness, *Thomas* provided a means to triangulate the “voiceprint” of the Jesus of history with the canonical gospels. The Jesus voiceprint was deemed evident in particular forms (parables and aphorisms) and rhetorical strategies, such as a reversal of expectation, paradox, and parody.³⁶ Seminarists compared qualifying sayings across distinct traditions and tried to uncover Jesus’ own message before the overlay of theology and oral memory. Though only two sayings in *Thomas* (97 “The Empty Jar” and 98 “The Assassin”) were deemed likely to have been said by Jesus without canonical parallels, the newly found gospel was the key to uncovering Jesus’ vision of the “kingdom of heaven.” The Jesus of the gospels is most often portrayed as an apocalyptic preacher who expected “God’s kingdom” to

²⁹ As Funk acknowledged, “the loss of received notions of the Bible regularly produces an emotionally devastating experience” 1996, 22.

³⁰ Funk, *Jesus as Precursor*, 1976, 156.

³¹ Funk 1996 *Ibid*, 6-7.

³² Dart *Jesus of Heresy* 1998, 153 and “Bible Scholars Vote: What Did Jesus Say or Not Say?,” Nov. 11, 1985.

³³ “Robert Walter Funk, In Memoriam.”

³⁴ *The Five Gospels* was even dedicated to D.F. Strauss, along with Thomas Jefferson and Galileo Galilei.

³⁵ Ong 1982 *Orality and Literacy; The Five Gospels* 27-29.

³⁶ *The Five Gospels* 30-34; Funk, *Honest to Jesus* 1996, 151-158.

descend to earth and separate the righteous from unrighteous (e.g. Matthew 7:21-23).³⁷ *Thomas* and select passages in Luke, however, present an alternative view:

Thomas 113: “His disciples said to him, “When will the <Father’s> imperial rule come?” “It will not come by watching for it. It will not be said, ‘Look here!’ or ‘Look, there!’ ‘Rather, the Father’s imperial rule is spread out upon the earth, and people don’t see it.” (trans. *The Five Gospels*, 531)

Luke 17:20-21: You won’t be able to observe the coming of God’s imperial rule. People are not going to be able to say, “Look, here it is!” or “Over there!” On the contrary, God’s imperial rule is right there in your presence.” (trans. *Five Gospels*, 364).

In these close parallels the “Father’s imperial rule” is already present. Utilizing the “criterion of embarrassment,” the Seminar voted that the quote from Luke would only have been included if it were so well-known in the communal memory as to be unthinkable not to include it. Seminarists voted that the independent attestation of the realized kingdom in *Thomas* 113, 3, and 51 suggests this view could be traced to the historical Jesus. Apocalyptic expectation was a misinterpretation disseminated by early churches.³⁸ Jesus preached a “kingdom” that was everywhere present, God’s own activity in the world, one that conditioned time with the eternal.

The shift from an apocalyptic to a realized eschatology reframes Jesus’ entire message. As in the “lilies” parable, Jesus trusted God’s domain provides for all.³⁹ As seen in “turn the other cheek” (Matthew 5:39; Luke 6:29), “give one’s coat and shirt” (Matthew 5:40), or “love your enemies (Luke 6:26), Jesus derived a radical ethic of giving from realization of the kingdom. Later tenets of normative Christianity – the kerygma, Son of Man, Second Adam, the blood atonement, or prophecy of Jesus’ return – require a linear concept of time to be valid. If the kingdom is eternal and present everywhere, these pillars of traditional dogma are theologically unnecessary.

³⁷ “Not everyone who addresses me as ‘Master, master’ will get into Heaven’s domain – only those who carry out the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will address me: ‘Master, master, didn’t we use your name when we prophesied? Didn’t we use your name when we exorcised demons? Didn’t we use your name when we performed all those miracles?’ Then I will tell them honestly: ‘I never knew you; get away from me, you subverters of the law!’” (trans. *The Five Gospels*, 158)

³⁸ *The Five Gospels*, 136-137. To be sure, this is not the only way of interpreting the historical Jesus through the Gospel of Thomas. April DeConick argued that Jesus was an apocalyptic teacher in *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas*.

³⁹ Luke 12: 22-28.

The Seminar published their findings in *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* in 1993. Their “red letter edition” color-coded the sayings of Jesus based upon the votes of the seminar.⁴⁰ On the one hand, the Jesus Seminar was precisely what it set out to be: a group of professionally trained New Testament scholars who used the tools of historical research to determine the Jesus of history as best they could and dispense their findings to the public. On the other, any strong revision of Christian memory has enormous implications for normative belief. The Seminar’s Jesus offers as a scathing critique of traditional memory. The canonical gospels muffle Jesus’s voice beneath the concerns of the early proto-orthodox church.⁴¹ The New Testament writers misunderstood Jesus’ most fundamental message: the realization of God’s domain on earth and disavowal of John the Baptist’s apocalyptic eschatology. Scholars needed texts labeled heretical or apocryphal to find the Jesus of history. Miracles, the virgin birth and *kerygma* not only betrayed rational thought, but were borrowed from comparable pagan gods such as Osiris.⁴²

It is no wonder that the Jesus Seminar was an object of controversy, even opprobrium. In early February 1986, John Lown, professor of philosophy and religion at Point Loma Nazarene College, was asked to discontinue participation in the Jesus Seminar or renounce his chair. Lown resigned from the evangelical college soon thereafter, understanding that the more “literalistic” reading of scripture practiced at Point Loma would be at odds with his “liberal” methodology.⁴³

The practice of public seminar meetings meant their votes were published in newspapers. Headlines for the reports were direct and provocative: “Was the Crucifixion of Jesus an Accidental Error of Justice?”; “Bible Scholars Say Jesus Didn’t Create or Teach Lord’s Prayer”; “Jesus Didn’t Promise to Return”; “Thus Saith the Lord’ Challenged.” Unsurprisingly, such coverage led to a deluge of letters to the editor. The letters chided the Seminar for hubris and irreverence in determining the true Jesus through colored marbles.⁴⁴ They often questioned the nature of scholarship itself: “28 out of 30 “academically mainstream” and “very careful” scholars

⁴⁰ **Red** indicated this item unequivocally helps determine who Jesus was. **Pink** almost certainly goes back to the historical Jesus, but with slight modifications. **Gray** indicates it should not be included as a saying of Jesus but some of the content may be useful in determining who Jesus was. **Black** indicates it will not be included. *The Five Gospels*, 36.

⁴¹ *Five Gospels*, 21-25.

⁴² Funk, *Honest to Jesus* 1996, 35.

⁴³ Details of this can be found in Dart’s February 12, 1986 article “My continuation in the Jesus Seminar is a matter of my personal integrity.”: *New Testament Scholar Quits Nazarene Faculty*.

⁴⁴ The Seminar voted on the legitimacy of a saying of Jesus using colored marbles. **Red** indicated this item unequivocally helps determine who Jesus was. **Pink** almost certainly goes back to the historical Jesus, but with slight modifications. **Gray** indicates it should not be included as a saying of Jesus but some of the content may be useful in determining who Jesus was. **Black** indicates it will not be included.

decided that Jesus never said he would come again. So what? Dart knows as well as anyone that scholars involved in New Testament studies invent critical reconstructions of Jesus with a regularity rivaled only by the migration of the lemmings to the sea, and usually with the same results.”⁴⁵ The letters also focus on the implications of their research for contemporary faith:

“It is ludicrous for the Jesus Seminar to state that their "findings" do not act to tear down any people's faith. They claim that Jesus didn't speak the words attributed to him, he didn't perform any miracles and that he didn't physically resurrect after his death. Since most of the New Testament theology is dependent on at least one of those three things, that leaves us following some wimpy do-gooder who got in trouble with the law and was crucified. Not much point to that. . . .the seminar can remain in their delusions. I will follow the historic, Biblical Jesus.”⁴⁶

Alongside publication of *The Five Gospels*, many of the scholars in the Seminar would publish their own historical Jesus research. Funk’s own *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (1996) best illumines how the drive to revise traditional Christian memory was borne of a response to modernization. Invoking the work of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, Funk avers the old symbolic universe of traditional Christianity is on the decline.⁴⁷ The mythic image of Jesus (the *kerygma*, virgin birth, miracles, Son of Man) cannot speak to concerns like disenchantment, religious pluralism, and basic democratic humanism. This image, however, is just a Christian “overlay.”⁴⁸ The Jesus of history, “liberate[d] from the scriptural and creedal and experiential prisons in which we have incarcerated him,” speaks directly to a secular and pluralized world.⁴⁹ This Jesus was transformed by a mystical experience of the kingdom of heaven, an alternative reality behind the phenomenal and constructed worlds.⁵⁰ Such a transformed vision is available to all persons, and therefore better suited to an age of democratic individualism than the reverence and worship of a monarchic past.⁵¹ The witty sage unearthed by *Thomas* offers a western exemplar of wisdom to promote interreligious dialogue with other

⁴⁵ (Richard J Teuson, Tujunga March 18, 1989, “Furor Over Bible Scholars on Second Coming of Christ.” (In response to March 5, 1989, Dart “Jesus Didn’t Promise to Return, Bible Scholar Group Says.).

⁴⁶ Ramon E. Morales, “Jesus Seminar Undermines Foundations of Christianity,” March 25, 1995.

⁴⁷ Funk 1996 *Honest to Jesus*, 74-75 and 298.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 162-164.

⁴⁹ Ibid 300.

⁵⁰ Ibid 165-168.

⁵¹ Ibid 304-306.

world religions.⁵² God's domain dissolves socially constructed ethnic boundaries.⁵³ Funk's Jesus even disavowed organized religion in favor of an unbrokered relationship to God – precisely the sort of sage that would appeal to the SBNR “spiritual but not religious (SBNR)” and a global, secular world.⁵⁴ In sum, the newly discovered historical Jesus could spark “a powerful new reformation, one that matches, or perhaps even exceeds, the quake produced by the great reformers of the fifteenth through the nineteenth centuries. Seismic activity has been too long dormant.”⁵⁵

Jesus the Guru

From the mid-1970s on, it has been common for scholars, religious figures, and media to draw parallels between the Jesus featured in *The Gospel of Thomas* and the teachings of Hinduism and Buddhism. James Robinson makes the parallel draws the parallel in the third paragraph of his introduction to The Nag Hammadi Library in English.⁵⁶ In the intro to her enormously popular *The Gnostic Gospels*, Elaine Pagels remarks “the living Jesus. . . speaks in sayings as cryptic and compelling as Zen *koans*.”⁵⁷ A collection of parallel sayings from Jesus and the Buddha was edited by Marcus Borg of the Jesus Seminar and Jack Kornfield, leader of Spirit Rock in California and one who brought helped bring Vipassana (or “mindfulness”) meditation to the west.⁵⁸

Such parallelisms have to be understood in the context of how Asian religions have been received and constructed within America.⁵⁹ Since Ralph Waldo Emerson first drew parallels between Jesus, Plato, and the “Hindoos” in his essay “Representative Men,” eastern religions have served as a “contemplative” other to a purely formal Christianity and a “spiritual”

⁵² Ibid 67 and 302.

⁵³ Ibid 311-312.

⁵⁴ Ibid 302 and 311: “the inauguration of a priesthood and a clergy therefore seems inimical to Jesus’ wishes.”

⁵⁵ Ibid 21.

⁵⁶ “The focus of [the Nag Hammadi Library] has much in common with primitive Christianity, with eastern religions, and with holy men of all times, as well as with the more secular equivalents of today, such as the counter-culture movements coming from the 1960’s.” James M. Robinson, “Introduction,” 1.

⁵⁷ Pagels, *1979Gnostic Gospels*, xxi.

⁵⁸ For especially pertinent examples of the Eastern Jesus, see: Thich Naht Hahn, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*; Elizabeth Claire Prophet, *The Lost Years of Jesus: Documentary Evidence of Jesus’s 17-Year Journey to the East*; Marcus Borg and Jack Kornfield, *Jesus and Buddha: Parallel Sayings*; John M. Newman, *Quest for the Kingdom: The Secret Teachings of Jesus in the Light of Yogic Mysticism* (discussed below).

⁵⁹ Eastern religions received and constructed in America as: “contemplative” to a “dogmatic” Christianity; “spiritual” vis-à-vis an industrialized, materialistic west; “experiential” as opposed to “formal.” See Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, esp. “Metaphysical Asia;” Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West*; Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*; Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism, 1844-1912*.

alternative to a materialistic west. As further Buddhist sutras and Hindu texts were translated into English, Asian religions further served to contrast a “spiritual” approach to life vis-à-vis the industrialized, materialistic west.

Writers such as Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) and DT Suzuki (1870-1966) highlighted the “experiential” aspects of eastern religion in contrast to purely formal and dogmatic Christianity.⁶⁰ And after the Asian Exclusion Act was lifted in 1965, most of the teachers who arrived in the US advocated Tantric forms of Hinduism and Buddhism, by which I mean the body and material world are expressions of divine energy.⁶¹ In framing the Jesus of the Gospel of Thomas as an “eastern” teacher, then, he is made to give voice to these critiques of Christianity and western materialism from within the Christian tradition itself.

OshoRajneesh

Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, better known as OshoOsho, was the first leader of a new religious movement (at this time his ashram in Pune, India) to give religious commentaries on the NHCNag Hammadi Codices. Soon after relocating with his followers to Pune, India, OshoRajneesh gave a series of twenty-one talks on logia from *The Gospel of Thomas*.⁶² In 1974, the NHLENag Hammadi Library in English had not been published, and OshoRajneesh was limited in his knowledge of the NHCNag Hammadi Codices to PeuchPuech and Quispel’s translation. In these talks, OshoRajneesh separates the Jesus of tradition from Jesus the Gnostic Tantricka: a Jesus steeped in the Upanisads, a purveyor of non-dualist metaphysics, critic of western modernization, and a purveyor of spiritual technologies (including sex magic), meant to catalyze altered states of consciousness and induce personal transformation.⁶³ Rajneesh is

⁶⁰ Suzuki’s framing of Zen in terms an experience of satori is deeply influenced by William James’ model of mysticism and Theosophical constructions of Buddhism. See ((Tweed 2005)) and . . .

⁶¹ Kripal, 2007 *Esalen*, refers to this as the “Tantric Turn” away from forms of body-denying Advaita to the embrace of embodied Tantrism. The implied definition of Tantra is derived from David Gordon White, *Tantra in Practice: A Reader*, 8. “Tantra is the Asian body of beliefs and practices which, working from the principle that the universe we experience is nothing other than the concrete manifestation of the divine energy of the godhead that creates and maintains that universe, seeks to ritually appropriate and channel that energy, within the human microcosm, in creative and emancipatory ways.”

⁶² OshoRajneesh 1984 *The Mustard Seed* marks these talks as delivered Aug 21 –Sept 10, 1974. OshoRajneesh was working from the PeuchPuech, Quispel, etc. translation, 1959.

⁶³ To be sure, comparison between Jesus and Hinduism antedates the Nag Hammadi Library. In Swama Saradananda’s *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master*, 416, we have the following account concerning Ramakrishna’s vision of Jesus: “Very soon the person [Jesus] approached him and from the bottom of the Master’s pure heart came out with a ringing sound, the words, “Jesus! Jesus the Christ, the great Yogi, the loving Son of God, one with the Father, who gave his heart’s blood and put up with endless torture in order to deliver men from sorrow and misery!”

perhaps best known for his vision of Tantra that emphasized sex and sexual pleasure, which Hugh Urban labels “Neo-Tantra.”⁶⁴

Although OshoRajneesh never mentions Nag Hammadi or Chenoboskian, he is aware *Thomas* was recently discovered in Egypt.⁶⁵ He avers these sayings were preserved by disciples of Jesus but “hidden away” because they were at odds with organized religion: “All these sayings which we are discussing belong to [*The Gospel of Thomas*]. They are not from the authorized version, because the authorized version can never be right – it is impossible. Because once you organize a religion the spirit dies.”⁶⁶ OshoRajneesh’s Weberian insight into the institutionalization of charisma is meant as a critique the Catholic tradition. By founding the church on a message of supernatural miracles, it is clear to The Catholic Church founded their religion on the miracles of Jesus. For OshoRajneesh, this shows the Catholic church did not understand Jesus: “Christianity depends not on Jesus, but on Jesus’ miracles. If some day it is proved he never raised a man from death, he never cured a blind man, he never healed a leper, then Christianity would immediately disappear.”⁶⁷

The Catholic Church needed to suppress gospels such as *Thomas* in order to obfuscate Jesus’ true identity – a guru who received his spiritual training in India. Jesus spent his “lost years” first in Egypt and then in India, becoming steeped in what OshoRajneesh calls Vedanta (an expansive category for OshoRajneesh that includes the Vedas, Upanisads, the Mahabharata, as well as Tantric and Buddhist texts).⁶⁸ The hypothesis Jesus spent his lost years in the East is not novel to OshoRajneesh. Nicholas Nikovech posited Jesus visited Tibet in *The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ* (1894), while Theosophist Levi Dowling posited India in his *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus Christ* in 1908.⁶⁹ For OshoRajneesh, *Thomas* confirms the latter hypothesis. “Mystical” sayings such as number 77 only make sense for OshoRajneesh as witnesses to

Jesus, the god-man, then embraced the Master and disappeared into his body and the Master entered into ecstasy (*Bhav Samadhi*), lost normal consciousness and remained identified for some time with the Omnipresent *Brahman* (God, the Ocean of Consciousness) with attributes.” Mention must also be made of Paramahansa Yogananda’s books *The Yoga of Jesus* and *The Second Coming of Christ*.

⁶⁴ Urban, *Zorba the Buddha*, 76-78

⁶⁵ Ibid, 125.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid 370.

⁶⁸ Ibid 351-352.

⁶⁹ Nikovech Notivich, *The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ* 1894; Dowling, *Aquarian Gospel of Jesus Christ*. 1908

Upanishadic training.⁷⁰ When he returned to Palestine, Jesus served as a guru whose sole aim was to awaken disciples to their own inner divinity.⁷¹ According to OshoRajneesh, the Catholic Church excised any reference to Jesus' days in India from the New Testament.⁷² If Jesus was trained, Rajneesh concludes, then he could not be a unique Son of God. And if Jesus is simply a guru awakening his disciples to their own inner divinity, there is no need for a church to found an organized religion.

The nondual metaphysics Osho's of Rajneesh's Jesus is a prescription, in my own terms, for disenchantment of the natural world and the conditions wrought by modernization. It is in his exegeses of sayings which center on the "Kingdom of Heaven," such as sayings 20, 3, and 76, that this is most evident.⁷³ According to OshoRajneesh, Jesus' doctrine of the Kingdom shows him to be a monist: "Jesus is saying "God is the universe, this whole existence. As it is, it is divine. God has dissolved himself into creation."⁷⁴ The Kingdom therefore is not attained after death or the end of time, but entails a shift in consciousness to an experience outside of temporal awareness. The slow pace of life in the ancient world made this form of consciousness more easily accessible to Jesus or the Buddha, but the speed of the modern, technologized world has made this achievement much more difficult.⁷⁵ Moreover, the absence of a religious perspective on the world – one where God is both *within* and *without* (Logion 3) – empties both the individual and the world of meaning. Internally, individuals attempt to fill this absence through the accumulation of goods. Capitalist corporations become the projectors of *maya*: "first, they create supply, then they advertise, then they create desire; then the demand comes in. . . . [the consumer thinks] "now, here is the goal! . . . once I achieve it, everything is achieved!"⁷⁶ Externally, a disenchanted cosmos is impossible to relate to as a Thou to one's I.⁷⁷ Saying 3, particularly "if you will know yourselves, then you will be known and you will know that you are the sons of the living father," points to a resolution for this condition. That is, a person's

⁷⁰ Ibid, 351- 355. "Jesus said, "It is I who am the light which is above them all. It is I who am the all. From me did the all come forth, and unto me did the all extend. Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there." Gospel of Thomas logion 77.

⁷¹ Ibid "Lecture One," especially 10-11.

⁷² Ibid, 370-374.

⁷³ Ibid 1-27, 155-171, and 300-325.

⁷⁴ Ibid 313.

⁷⁵ Ibid 164-165 and 306-307.

⁷⁶ Ibid 167.

⁷⁷ Ibid 320. "The universe of the scientist and the universe of a religious man like Jesus is totally different. The universe for the scientist is just accidental: there exists no relationship between you and the universe; it is uncaring, it does not bother about you. You are just accidental; if you were not there, existence would not have felt a little bit your absence; if you are there, your presence is not known to the universe. If you disappear, the universe is not going to shed tears for you."

divine individuality within can only find mirroring in a world that is similarly understood to be the manifestation of the divine. The Kingdom represents consciousness of a profound relationship between this inner divinity and the identical divinity dissolved into the cosmos.⁷⁸

Given this fast-paced, disenchanted world, how can consciousness of the Kingdom be achieved? Osho's Rajneesh's Jesus prescribes a number of psycho-spiritual techniques, two of which are notable. The first is a form of sex magic. Exegeting saying 22, on making "the inner like the outer," Osho Rajneesh finds a Jesus who blends Jung and Tantra:

"Whenever you make love to a woman, make it with closed eyes, make it a meditation. The woman outside helps for the inner woman to become awake. And when you make love your inner energies of male and female both come to a peak. And when the orgasm happens, it is not between you and the outer woman, it always happens between you and the inner woman."⁷⁹

On the one hand, Osho Rajneesh here is evidently speaking to young disciples who had lived through the sexual revolution.⁸⁰ Sexuality is not to be renounced, but is a force that can be channeled in order to achieve super-consciousness. Organized religions denied and repressed this possibility. On the other hand, this sexual message concerning sexuality contradicts the theology of *Thomas*.⁸¹ While debate exists whether the Thomas community or compilers of Thomas were ascetic, encratite, or celibate, no scholar of which I am aware posits that they had religious sexual practices. OshoRajneesh's interpretation is quite subtlepsychologizes the sexual. By importing the Jungian notion of the *mysterium coniunctus*, the wedding of the anima and ego, OshoRajneesh internalizes the result of the sexual magic. The focused orgasm brings a temporary vision of the Kingdom (– the bi-unity of the inner and outer, male and female) – that can only be realized as a permanent state of being through meditation.⁸²

⁷⁸ Ibid 316.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 192.

⁸⁰ On OshoRajneesh's place in how the discourse of "sexual revolution" was spiritualized in India, see Urban 2015, 76-92.

⁸¹ While debate exists whether the Thomas community or compilers of Thomas were ascetic, encratite, or celibate, no scholar of which I am aware posits that they had religious sexual practices.

⁸² OshoRajneesh 1984, ???

Second, Logion 146⁸³ is read as an indication Jesus promoted a form of meditative self-understanding. Where many have read Logion 6 as an indication of that Jesus transgressed the laws of Pharisaic Judaism, **Jesus' antinomian relationship to Pharisaic Judaism**, OshoRajneesh finds a message of realizing an exhortation to realize one's essence through moderation. Orthodox and traditional religions, especially Protestantism, have placed emphasis on *doing*. Fasting, giving alms, prayer, or eating healthy are sacred actions. OshoRajneesh's Jesus avers that no act is intrinsically holy. Only *being* is holy. Realizing the state of being, every act from fasting and alms to walking becomes a form of prayer, a living reciprocal relationship between one's being and the being of God.

John Newman

John Newman received his PhD in East Asian Studies before working for fifteen years as a forensic documentary specialist in the Army and National Security Agency. As a scholar he is best known for his studies of Lee Harvey Oswald and the John F. Kennedy Assassination.⁸⁴ He Newman occupies the opposite end of the Tantric spectrum from OshoRajneesh. Whereas OshoRajneesh's readings of the NHC Nag Hammadi Codices are intuitive, Newman's work is exceedingly rigorous and informed by secondary scholarship. This is not surprising. Whereas Osho Rajneesh is reading an English translation, Newman utilizes his facility in Greek and philology of Coptic to insert his readings into the academic debates on the *Gospel of Thomas* and historical Jesus.⁸⁶ And most importantly, whereas Osho Rajneesh advocates a "left hand path" of sex magic, Newman hews to the "right hand path" of meditation, intellectual discipline, and self-restraint. Both, however, express a doctrine of the "metaphysical body."⁸⁷ At present, Newman is a teacher of yoga in the tradition of B.K.S. Iyengar. Newman's readings of *The Gospel of Thomas* show how he attempts to reinterpret Jesus as a yogic practitioner and mystic along the same lines as Iyengar.

⁸³ Logion 14: If you fast you will beget sin for yourselves; and if you pray you will be condemned; and if you give alms you will do evil to your spirits. And if you go into any land and wander in the regions; if they receive you, eat what they set before you, and heal the sick among them. For what goes into your mouth will not defile you, but what comes out of your mouth, that is what will defile you.

⁸⁴ Newman *JFK and Viet Nam*; idem, *Oswald and the CIA* 1995.

⁸⁶ Newman is especially indebted to the work of Jesus Seminar members Robert Funk, John Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, and Stephen Patterson, but he also extensively quotes later scholars such as April DeConick and Richard Valantasis. See Newman 2011 Newman, *Quest for the Kingdom*., loc 91 kindle edition.

⁸⁷ Kripal 2007, 22.

Thomas is the key to a new Christian reformation for Newman: “a true reformation is not possible until the veil that has shrouded the historical Jesus for the last 2,000 years is lifted. This endeavor should not be confined to biblical scholars alone. A reformation cannot succeed until the people in the pews and people in general acquire and use the analytic tools to interpret the sayings of Jesus for themselves.”⁸⁸ Newman follows scholars like Crossan and Borg in seeing Jesus as a sapiential mystic for whom the Kingdom of Heaven was a present reality.⁸⁹ According to Newman, apocalyptic pronouncements dominate the canonical gospels because Jesus’ followers could not overcome the Jewish eschatology of John the Baptist in two short years.⁹⁰ The fundamentals of the historical Jesus’ real message can be reconstructed through *Thomas*. For Newman, the historical Jesus offered a mystical philosophy and practice that “bears an uncanny resemblance” to ancient yogic mysticism exemplified by the *Bhagavad Gita* (or “Song of the Lord”) and Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* (or “Aphorisms on Yoga”).⁹¹

The loadstone for Newman’s reconstruction of Jesus’ teachings is the second logion of the Coptic *Thomas*.⁹² “Jesus said: The one who seeks should not stop seeking until he finds. And when he finds, he will become troubled. And when he is troubled, he will be amazed (ωπηρε), and he will [become a king] and rule over all.” For Newman, this saying outlines “The Quest for the Kingdom”: a step-by-step program to mystical union that is implied in the sayings of the historical Jesus.⁹³ ωπηρε is the key to this reconstruction.⁹⁴ Newman notes (rightly) that ωπηρε may be translated either as “to marvel (for the Greek θαυμάζω)” and “to be amazed (for the Greek θαμβέω).”⁹⁵

For Newman, to “marvel” entails a rigorous disciplining of the intellect to achieve a new vision; if instead, Jesus intended “to be amazed,” that would suggest an emotionally passive stunning of the intellect. For Newman, evidence Newman finds evidence that Jesus intended “marvel” is found in Clement’s *Stromateis* II.9.45, where Clement purportedly quotes *The Gospel of the Hebrews* “ὁ θαυμάσας βασιλεύσει γέγραπται καὶ ὁ βασιλεύσας ἀναπαύσεται,.” which Newman translates as follows: “One that marvels (“thauamasas,”)212 will reign, and one

⁸⁸ Newman 2011 Newman, *Quest for the Kingdom*, kindle edition, loc 69.

⁸⁹ Newman 2011 Newman, *Quest for the Kingdom*, 4.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 9-10.

⁹¹ Newman 2011 Newman, *Quest for the Kingdom*, 53.

⁹² πεχε ις μητερο νοι πετωινη εφωινη βαντεφωινη αγροταν εφωανωινη φναωτρητρη αγω εφωινη φανωτορητρη φναρ ωπηρε αγω φναρρη εχμ πτηρη.

⁹³ Newman 2011 Newman, *Quest for the Kingdom*, chapter 2.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 19.

⁹⁵ Provide citations to LS and Crum. Newman 2011 Newman, *Quest for the Kingdom*, 83.

who has reigned will rest.”⁹⁶ “The one who wonders” is specifically linked to Plato by Clement just two lines earlier. Newman departs from a majority of scholars in asserting that a similar quotation by Clement, found in V.14.96, is *not* from *Gospel of the Hebrews* but is instead an unmarked quotation of a Gnosticized Greek *Thomas*: “Οὐ παύσεται ὁ ζητῶν, ἕως ἂν εὕρῃ· εὐρῶν δὲ θαμβηθήσεται, θαμβηθεὶς δὲ βασιλεύσει, βασιλεύσας δὲ ἐπαναπαήσεται.” Newman translates this as follows: “One who seeks, will not stop until one finds. Having found, one will be astounded (“thambethesetai,” a future passive indicative verb) and having been astounded (“thambetheis,” an aorist passive participle) one will reign, and having reigned, one will rest.”⁹⁷ The use of θαμβηθήσεται corroborates the same verb used in POxy 654.5-9, and has, in Newman’s view, led many scholars to presume the Oxyrhynchus version is less Gnostic and primary. Newman, however, concludes that a “Gnosticized” version of *Thomas* was quoted by Clement, but that the earliest evidence – *The Gospel of the Hebrews* – shows “to marvel” was original. The Coptic version managed to preserve this primary version.

With this “Quest Template” as guide, Newman re-reads Jesus as detailing a process of inner war with the ego as a means to realize the unconscious, spiritual self. To him, this message parallels the “yogic mysticism” apparent in *The Bhagavad Gita*, Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras*, and the writings of contemporary yogi B.K. Iyengar.⁹⁸ For Newman, what Jesus named a “demon” or “thief” (Logia 21, 35, 98 and 103) and *The Bhagavad Gita* named *asurika*, can be recognized today is the same thing psychologists call an as ‘an unhealthy ego.’”⁹⁹ When one recognizes this “demon” is assaulting the house of the spirit, one becomes “disturbed.” Jesus’ message was that the spiritual self (– a spark of luminous awareness operating below consciousness) – had to do battle against this demon by cultivating self-awareness. The first step in developing spiritual awareness is detached mindfulness, or *savasana pratyahara*, evident for Newman in Logion 42, “be passersby,” and 27, “fast as regards the world.”¹⁰⁰ To next step entails requires rigorous focus and concentration, such as arming against the thief in Logia 21, the binding of the thief’s hands in Logia 35, or building a city on a hill in 32.¹⁰¹ These parables from *Thomas* are interpreted by Newman to suggest techniques of “marveling.” These practices are akin to

⁹⁶ Newman, John. *Quest For The Kingdom*, 63-64

⁹⁷ Newman, John. *Quest For The Kingdom*, 66

⁹⁸ Newman 2011 Newman, *Quest for the Kingdom*, 22 and 143.

⁹⁹ Newman 2011 Newman, *Quest for the Kingdom*, 134 (loc 3145).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 143. “Be passersby” is likened to: “the seeker prepares for *pratyahara* (detachment) through practice of *asanas* (physical exercise) and *pranayama* (breathing techniques).”

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 136.

dharana (focused concentration) and *dhyana* (meditation), ways of harnessing the body-mind to make it possible to live outside of time.¹⁰²

Crucially, the route to *kaivalya* (transcendent isolation) is through embodied mysticism. Consider logion 29.¹⁰³ For Newman this is a recognition on the part of the He reads this logion as evidence Jesus teaches that one must work *with*, not *against*, the body to cultivate the spiritual seed into a mature spirit.¹⁰⁴ One must discipline the body-senses in order to cultivate the seed of spirit into a mature union with the divine consciousness that pervades all things. Anthropological dualism becomes nondualism, The Kingdom of Heaven is identical to what yogic mysticism refers to as *sSamadhi* (union).¹⁰⁵ In other words, Jesus spoke in veiled language about spiritual techniques that could be used to realize the divine within (the spiritual seed) and without (the Kingdom of Heaven).

Read as scholarship, Newman's work is problematic. The lack of a direct object in Coptic logion 2 indicates the translation of ⲡⲟⲩⲛⲣⲉ must be intransitive, that is, "to be amazed."¹⁰⁶ While his distinction between the two quotes from Clement is interesting is trenchant, to aver Clement 2.9.45 is historically primary but emended ("to rest") and later corrected in a 4th century Coptic manuscript is tortured logic. Why would the 4th century Coptic manuscript preserve *this* correct reading while (according to Newman) bumbling so much else?

The argument for the historical primacy of *The Gospel of the Hebrews* is also dependent upon a straw-man presentation of the Gnostics as essentialists with no need or interest in spiritual practices and rigorous discipline. Newman's comparative practice also runs aground into the early phenomenological trap: trap so common in the early phenomenological forms of comparison: differences are contextual adaptations of a perennial quest. Patanjali, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and Jesus are all purveyors of a yogic *psychologia perennis*, a perennial psychology of cultivating secondary awareness through defeat of an ego.¹⁰⁷

Having noted all of that, it remains true that Newman's work nevertheless provides an astonishingly interesting and complex example of how the Nag Hammadi codices are being read to reconstruct Christian memory in the 21st century. Newman's

¹⁰² Ibid 143. Newman quotes Iyengar, *Light on Life*, 243, on the achievement of pure consciousness within time.

¹⁰³ "If the flesh existed for the sake of the spirit, it would be a marvel. If the spirit existed for the sake of the body, it would be a marvel of marvels. Nevertheless, I marvel at how this great wealth settled in this poverty."

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 190-196.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 334.

¹⁰⁶ intransitive translation Crumb 581b

¹⁰⁷ See Parsons, "Psychologia Perennis and the Academic Study of Mysticism," 2008 on "psychologia perennis" as a psychologized adaptation of the esoteric *philosophia perennis*.

rhetorical antagonists are scholars. He already presumes that orthodox memory is incorrect, and is distinguishing his views from other counter-memories within scholarship. His reconstruction is presented as a philological and comparative exercise, but the meanings he finds in scholarship are better understood as Newman's own wishes for a Jesus suited to the 21st century. e. **And yet, the Jesus who comes through better suited to modern America than history.** His mystical experience and transformed consciousness drew him outside the influence of John the Baptist to proclaim a sapiential mysticism. This Jesus sees a (re-)enchanted world infused by conscious light. He was a pioneering healer who exorcised demons with techniques akin to modern psychoanalysis. And it Newman's argument makes the founder of Christianity a practitioner and teacher of yoga, understood by Newman as arising primarily in the east but ultimately a primordial, perennial doctrine. While this does entail a kind of asceticism, the yogic dimension also realigns an ascetic Jesus with the pro-embodiment trajectory evident in the "tantric turn."¹⁰⁸

The Sexual Jesus

One of the best-selling books of all time, Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, is a blockbuster by any measure. As of 2009, the book sold over 80 million copies and the film grossed over 750 million worldwide.¹⁰⁹ Its immense popularity ignited a media firestorm, leading to speeches by eminent pastors and scholars denouncing it, symposia dedicated to its study, and numerous films and documentaries assessing its claims.¹¹⁰ The impact of *The Da Vinci Code* is to be found arises from in the counter-memory it offers: Jesus as a sexual man, a father. Locating the influence of the NHC Nag Hammadi Codices on this counter-memory requires a turn to Brown's primary source: *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*.

Holy Blood, Holy Grail is a 1982 conspiracy history that itself spent 13 weeks on the best-seller list. In it, authors Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln put forth the argument that all of Catholic history is a cover-up.¹¹¹ Jesus and Mary Magdalene had been married and Mary became pregnant before the crucifixion.¹¹² After Jesus' death, Mary was

¹⁰⁸ Newman 2011 Newman, *Quest for the Kingdom*, 192 (loc 4501)

¹⁰⁹ "More than 80 million copies sold" is offered on the back cover of *The Da Vinci Code*, 2006 paperback edition. On the overall box office, see <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=davincicode.htm>. Anchor Books were contacted for updated sales numbers but declined.

¹¹⁰ The best bibliography of resources dedicated to *The Da Vinci Code* is <http://priory-of-sion.com/dvc/documentaries.html>

¹¹¹ Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln 1982, chapters 12 and 13.

¹¹² Baigent, Leigh and Lincoln 1982, 313-314.

smuggled into France. Their bloodline was considered holy – the so-called “holy grail” – and ascended to political power as the Merovingian kings of Paris. During the later middle Ages this bloodline was a secret protected by the Knights Templar, while in modernity the task would be taken up by a mysterious Priory of Sion.¹¹³ The Catholic Church is fully aware of the history of Jesus, but censored all references to the truth from canonical documents.

It is important to note Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln had put forward their theories in three documentaries for BBC Two prior to their reading of the Nag Hammadi.¹¹⁴ The hypothetical bloodline, Templar conspiracy and Priory of Scion is a creation counterfeit concocted byof Pierre Plantard in the mid 20th century. The latter contrived the *Dossiers Secrets d’Henri Lobineau* and deposited them in the *Bibliothèque Nationale* in Paris.¹¹⁵ Media in England and France understandably focused on the conspiratorial history of the Templars and Priory of Sion. As the authors themselves note in the introduction to the *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*HBHG, it was the implications their theory had for Christian origins that generated the most interest in America.¹¹⁶

The authors cite the Gospels of Thomas, Mary and Phillip as proof of their hypothesis. They invoke Koester’s theory that some sayings in Thomas date to 50 CE to legitimize *all* texts in the Nag Hammadi. As they put it, “these documents escaped the censorship and revision of later Roman orthodoxy. . .and may well rest on first hand and/or eyewitness sources.”¹¹⁷ The Gospel of Mary is invoked to prove Mary and Peter were at odds. According to the authors, Peter and Mary’s dispute arose because Peter refused to accept the spiritual legitimacy of the bloodline. The Roman Catholic Church founded on Peter’s apostolic succession created the resurrection narrative and vilified Mary Magdalene as a whore in order to obfuscate the truth about Jesus.

The main proof evidence for the authors’ counter-memory comes from the *Gospel of Phillip*. One section in particular is key to their argument:

¹¹³ Ibid, Part Two.

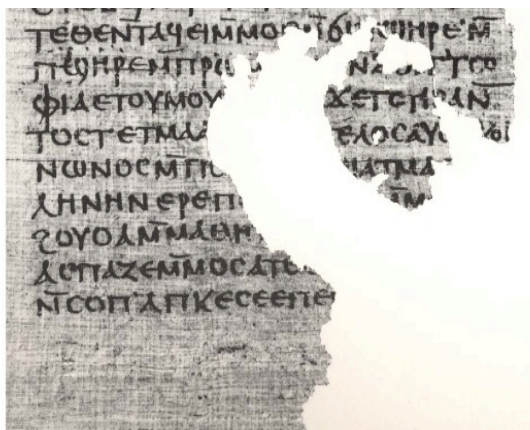
¹¹⁴ Lost Treasure of Jerusalem? 1972; The Priest, the Painter and the Devil 1974; The Shadow of the Templars 1979

¹¹⁵ S Newman 2005, 68-69.

¹¹⁶ In the “Introduction” to the paperback edition, the authors note “In America attention was focused almost entirely upon the last four chapters of our book – the chapters pertaining to Jesus, “The Grail Dynasty,” the origins of Christianity, and the history of the early Church. For the American public the most important aspect of our book seemed to have been our discussion of Christianity and attendant implications of our theories.” Ibid, 21.

¹¹⁷ *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* 381.

“And the companion of the Savior is Mary Magdalen. But Christ loved her more than all the disciples and used to kiss her often on her mouth. The rest of the disciples were offended by it and expressed disapproval. They said to him, “Why do you love her more than all of us?” The savior answered and said to them, “Why do I not love you like her?”¹¹⁸



“And the companion of the [Savior is] Mary Magdalen. [But Christ loved her] more than [all] the disciples [and used to] kiss her [often] on her [mouth]. The rest of [the disciples were offended] by it [and expressed disapproval]. They said to him, “Why do you love her more than all of us?” The savior answered and said to them, “Why do I not love you like her?” (Gospel of Philip 63:33-64:35. Wesley W. Isenberg translation 1977 *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* 1st Ed.).

For Baigent and the authors, this proves Mary and Jesus had an intimate relationship. Their assertion is made possible by editorial choices made in the first edition of *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*. In this edition, some translators conjectured to fill smaller lacunae in the manuscripts, rather than leave a blank in the translation (image). The text of *Phillip* arrives at a lacuna just after the verb-noun combination $\alpha\sigma\pi\alpha\zeta\epsilon\mu\mu\omicron\varsigma$, “kiss her.” Translator Wesley W. Isenberg filled the lacunae with “her mouth,” though only the feminine definite article and feminine possessive are legible. “Mouth” is a sound editorial choice, though for reasons Baigent and others seem to be unaware. Namely, the Valentinian ritual of the “holy kiss” is present in the gospel of Philip as an aspect of initiation.¹¹⁹ Moreover, the “kiss” was a common aspect of baptismal initiation within the early Christian community as a whole (fn). Some Valentinians do appear to have supported sexual activities, but this kiss was not an indication of them.¹²⁰ When *Phillip* is quoted in the *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, the brackets indicating hypothetical reconstruction are removed. As such, this conjectured fill of a lacuna helped to spawn a whole new counter-memory of a sexual Jesus.

The Da Vinci Code

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 382. Quoting NHCNag Hammadi Codices II,3.63:33-64:5

¹¹⁹ On this point, see Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed*.,

¹²⁰ See especially DeConick 2003, 307-342.

Dan Brown published *The Da Vinci Code* in 2004. In it, Brown popularized the hypothesis of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* by unveiling it in the context of a mystery thriller. *The Da Vinci Code* is part of the Robert Langdon series, four books which follow the thrilling life of the Harvard “Professor of Symbology.” *Angels and Demons* (2000), initially received with little acclaim, follows much the same formula as Brown’s later works. At the core of the story the Catholic Church is attempting to suppress the release of an important scientific-technological breakthrough.

With *The Da Vinci Code*, Brown moved from science to a conspiracy of history. Silas, a monk from the radical Catholic group Opus Dei, murders the four leading figures of the Priory of Sion in a single evening. The Grand Master of the Priory of Sion and leading curator of the Louvre, Jacques Saunierre, is one of them. As he bleeds out Saunierre leaves a series of cryptic clues for his granddaughter, Sophie, and Robert Langdon. Gradually Sophie and Robert piece together the conspiracy: Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene. Mary was pregnant at the time of crucifixion, and their daughter became the conduit of two royal bloodlines, David and Benjamin. This bloodline had been protected down through the ages. Langdon and Sophie’s search for the grail uncovers a further conspiracy: the Catholic Church had hidden this knowledge since the time of Nicea. Though the novel ends having absolved the Catholic Church of any guilt in the murders, their role in the historical conspiracy led to the cultural conversation about the person of Jesus and his relationship to Mary Magdalene.

The ancient Gnostics, however, play a more important role in *The Da Vinci Code* than Baigent’s book. At a critical point in the novel, just as the hero Robert Langdon is beginning to sense the magnitude of the mystery he is uncovering, he and his partner Sophie are introduced to a volume called “The Gnostic Gospels.”¹²¹ The volume contains “over 80 gospels” (including the Nag Hammadi Codices and Dead Sea Scrolls) that are “the earliest Church records.”¹²² They are said to exhibit a Jesus who is a mere human wisdom teacher.¹²³ His marriage to Mary Magdalene is part of the historical record suppressed by the Catholic Church, and the need to hide this secret is behind canonization and the destruction of other gospels.¹²⁴ While this is historically false, it is an important part of Brown’s counter-memory: normative Christianity suppressed the Gnostic truth to gain power and wealth. Significantly, Brown’s quotations of these “Gnostic Gospels” are

¹²¹ Brown 2003*Da Vinci Code*, 245.

¹²² Brown 2003*Ibid*, 234-235 and 245.

¹²³ *Ibid* 234 and 249.

¹²⁴ *Ibid* 243.

all taken word-for-word from *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, and show no knowledge of newer translations.

Brown takes another giant step beyond *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*: he uses the counter-memory of the sexual Jesus to reimagine Mary Magdalene as an embodiment of the divine feminine. Mary Magdalene is framed in Brown's novel as a goddess, the full feminine equal to Jesus. The Church needed to eradicate memory of her not just to remove justification for female leadership, but to suppress all practices and beliefs of fertility cults throughout the ancient world. As such, by returning the memory of Mary to Christianity, Brown is also attempting to open the Christian symbolic to other religious perspectives.

Brown uses the marriage of Jesus and Mary to sacralize sexual activity. Their union is the prototype of the *hieros gamos*.¹²⁵ As Robert Langdon puts it, "The next time you find yourself with a woman, look in your heart and see if you cannot approach sex as a mystical, spiritual act. Challenge yourself to find that spark of divinity that man can only achieve through union with the sacred feminine."¹²⁶ For the ancients, sex was "the sole means through which man could become spiritually complete and ultimately achieve *gnosis* – knowledge of the divine."¹²⁷ Dan Brown looks to the Jesus of these Gnostic Gospels in order to legitimize sex as a spiritual technology. Though Brown's readings strain the meanings of the original texts **themselves, they do so but the meaning found in them** in order to incorporateincorporates American concerns of the 21st century: feminism, a mystical approach to sexuality, and pluralism into the Christian symbolic.

Brown's work is a poignant example of how symbolic loss, memory, and modernization are inextricably intertwined. In public interviews Dan Brown recognizes that his novels are part of his own religious quest. Raised in a deeply religious Episcopalian household, he began to sense his attachment to Christianity was problematic as a teenager. When learning about the Big Bang, he asked his priest whether Genesis or science is true. His priest responded, "nice boys don't ask that question."¹²⁸ Later, when he left for college, Brown encountered religious discrimination and intolerance for the first time, leaving him to condemn religious polemics that denied pluralism.¹²⁹ His novels attempt to infuse the Christian symbolic with scientific openness and "universal" spirituality.

¹²⁵ Brown 2003Ibid, 308.

¹²⁶ Brown 2003Ibid, 310.

¹²⁷ Brown 2003, 308.

¹²⁸ Brown, interview on CBS This Morning.

¹²⁹ Brown, "Dan Brown Interviewed about The Da Vinci Code (Part 1 of 2)."

Angels and Demons, the first novel in the Robert Langdon series, gives expression to this tension between science and religion: the Catholic Church forcibly and violently suppresses any scientific view that will challenge their power and authority. In *The Da Vinci Code*, scientific knowledge is replaced by historical memory of the divine goddess and sexuality. His concern with a psychological-symbolic approach to religion – evident in Langdon’s title as “Professor of Symbology,” references to Joseph Campbell, and the perennial notion that all religions point to the same mystery strewn through Brown’s works – betray his own shift from belief-oriented Episcopalian to perennialist.¹³⁰ And it must be stressed that there is *no evidence* Brown read the NHCNag Hammadi Codices or Dead Sea Scrolls themselves.¹³¹ The assertion found in both *HBHG Holy Blood, Holy Grail* and *DC The Da Vinci Code* that Jesus was a mere human wisdom teacher clearly contradicts the majority of appearances of Jesus in the NHCNag Hammadi Codices. The NHCNag Hammadi Codices is filled with conflicting and contradictory Christologies, but suffice to say most of Jesus’ appearances are post-resurrection and he is anything but merely human. Yet scholars who studied *Thomas* (Koester, Robinson, etc.) and framed Jesus as a human wisdom teacher influenced the authors of *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*. *HBHG*. They in turn influenced Brown. Brown’s novel and film would then reach well over 100 million people worldwide.

Jesus the Myth

In the mid-19th century, D.F. Strauss was fighting for his academic life. His *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet* (*The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*) set off a public outcry in Germany that makes that of the Jesus Seminar pale in comparison. Simply by distinguishing the Jesus of history from the reports in the New Testament, most notably seeing miracles as projections of the early Christian community, Strauss made himself public enemy number one.

Less than a decade later, a much more provocative argument was given by Bruno Bauer, to much less opprobrium.¹³² The latter scholar averred that there had never been a Jesus of Nazareth. The life of Jesus presented in the New Testament gospels can be explained away as parallels to Greek and Roman mystery religions. Jesus is the mythic godman of a sect of Jews

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¹³¹ In his CBS *This Morning* interview for *Inferno*, Brown is asked a question about the then newly discovered “Gospel of Jesus’ Wife.” While stammering, Brown answers “some scholars even hypothesize there is a Gospel of Mary Magdalene.”

¹³² Bauer, *A Critique of the Gospels and a History of their Origin*. 1850.

who later became Christians. This hypothesis, known as “mythicism” or the “Christ myth” theory, has had numerous purveyors since the time of Bauer. At present, the most notable “Christ myth” arguments have come from Robert M. Price, fellow of the Jesus Seminar.¹³³

Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy popularized Mythicism for the English-speaking public. Freke, a self-described “stand up philosopher,” and Gandy, a historian (M.A. Classical Civilizations) achieved a success with *The Jesus Mysteries: Was the “Original Jesus” a Pagan God?*¹³⁴ Where Freke and Gandy go beyond standard Christ-myth theory when they turn ~~is~~ in ~~their turn~~ to the Nag Hammadi codices. They see an *inversion*: the Gnostics invented Jesus and disseminated the gospels as introductions to their deeper philosophy. *Jesus and the Lost Goddess* (2001) and *The Laughing Jesus* (2005) followed quickly thereafter, the former detailing the Gnostic philosophy the Jesus story embodies, the latter a critique of all Monotheistic fundamentalisms. Their work on the project culminated in *The Gospel of the Second Coming*, a fictional work where Jesus himself returns to deliver their own thesis. In their view, a new memory of Jesus is essential for healing western culture. In their own words, “We [the Christian West] are victims of an enormous ‘False Memory Syndrome’ and are in desperate need of collective therapy.”¹³⁵

Freke and Gandy’s counter-memory is constructed through three methods: comparison, history, and philosophy. Their comparative approach is indebted to Campbell and Jung. Researching ancient Mystery religions, Freke and Gandy amassed an impressive collection of parallels between “Pagan” dying-rising godmen (the archetype they refer to as Osiris-Dionysus) and Jesus of the gospels. They argue the myth of the dying-rising godman was recognized by pagans throughout the ancient world as a myth – in their sense, not-real – that encoded a perennial psychological experience of ego-death and rebirth into divine consciousness.¹³⁶ Every element of the gospel narrative – from the virgin birth and three wise men to Jesus’ resurrection in a cave – parallels narrative motifs found in the stories of Mithras, Osiris, Dionysus/Bachus, Attis, and many others.¹³⁷ When all the parallels are subtracted from the narrative, they aver, no historical Jesus is left.

¹³³ RM Price, *Deconstructing Jesus*; idem. *The Empty Tomb*; idem *The Christ-Myth Theory*; idem *The Incredible Shrinking Son of Man*.

¹³⁴ Freke and Gandy, 1999*The Jesus Mysteries*.

¹³⁵ Freke and Gandy 2006*The Laughing Jesus*, 23.

¹³⁶ Freke and Gandy 1999*Jesus Mysteries*, 27-62

¹³⁷ Ibid 5, 22, 27-62. For their list, see Freke and Gandy 2006, 56-7; 2007, 18.

From these parallels, Freke and Gandy then reconstruct the history of early Christianity. They call this the “Jesus Mysteries Thesis.”¹³⁸ They argue that gGiven that there is no remainder left in the life of Jesus once all the parallels have been accounted for, Freke and Gandy assume conclude he never existed. His story is the invention of Jewish Gnostics from Alexandria who adapted the Pagan godman myth.¹³⁹ In Jesus they synthesized Osiris-Dionysos with the Jewish figure of the “Messiah.”¹⁴⁰ For example, these Gnostics transformed Passover into the sacramental meal of the Mysteries by having Jesus offer bread and wine as symbols of his body and blood, thereby adapting Osiris being torn “limb from limb” and his body rendered into grain.¹⁴¹ Christianity was founded as a mystery religion.

Paul is indicative of this earliest form of Gnostic Christianity.¹⁴² For Freke and Gandy, Paul does not refer to a historical Jesus but preaches the transformative experience of the resurrected Christ. His use of “mystery” terminology such as *teleioi*, *pneuma*, *Sophia*, and *gnosis* all point to an initiatory experience into divine consciousness in life.¹⁴³ After the destruction of the second Temple these Gnostics felt it would be helpful to the newly dislocated Jews to provide an exoteric version of their mystery in Gospels. They left geographical errors and historical contradictions in the texts to prime readers into recognizing that the story was a myth, not history. Only *after* the writing of the canonical gospels would people *mis*-read the gospels as historical documents: the “Literalists.”¹⁴⁴

These Literalists missed the inner mysteries and developed formal rules, an episcopal hierarchy, and lost sight of the inner message of the myth. They wrote the pastoral epistles to make John and Paul sound like Literalists.¹⁴⁵ Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and later heresiologists are said to show that Gnostics were more plentiful than Christians until III CE.¹⁴⁶ Constantine only adopted Christianity because its hierarchy and authoritarianism aided his rule.¹⁴⁷ Eusebius was then hired as a propagandist to validate the orthodox counter-history as part of a “propaganda campaign” against the Gnostics.¹⁴⁸

¹³⁸ Freke and Gandy 1999*Jesus Mysteries*, 132.

¹³⁹ Freke and Gandy 1999,*Ibid*, 177-189.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 191-207.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid* 48, 194-199.

¹⁴² *Ibid* 159-175. Citations from Pagels 1975 are extensive in this chapter.

¹⁴³ *Ibid* 162-3, 166-7.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid* 204-5, 209-216.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid* 213-217.

¹⁴⁶ Freke and Gandy, *The Laughing Jesus* 2006, 67.

¹⁴⁷ Freke and Gandy, *Jesus Mysteries* 1999, 234-236.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid* 241-243.

For Freke and Gandy, The Nag Hammadi Codices and other Gnostic literature provide a window into the *symbolic* nature of original Christianity. Gnostics such as the authors of the *Gospel of Philip* saw the Christ story as “allegorical literature encoding eternal truths that could be creatively developed,” evidenced by the quote “Truth did not come into the world naked, but in images.”¹⁴⁹

The Gospel of Truth indicates that the Gnostics understood this life be a dream.¹⁵⁰ In practice, this leads Freke and Gandy reframe Gnostic texts as myths that encode the process of psychological-mystical realization. This process brings together texts from a variety of sources. The tTheogonies of the Valentinian Porphyry exhibit how the Primal Imagination emanates itself through syzygies or dualities that indicate consciousness and its object, culminating in individual human psyches, known as *eidolons*, within bodies.¹⁵¹ *The Book of Thomas the Contender* shows how this Christ functions as the *daemon*, or divine Higher Self, who instructs the *eidolon* Thomas (ego) to realize his or her divine identity.¹⁵³ The realization of this divine identity is read by Freke and Gandy as the ultimate message of many texts. textsFor example, such as the *Exegesis of the Soul* depictdepicts the “falling” of individual consciousness into separation from divine unity into distraction in thethe concerns and appetites of the *eidolon*. The bridal chamber, in which Christ as bridegroom awakens Sophia to her true nature, symbolizes enlightenment as a recognition of our eternal divinity (Christ) with an individual identity (Sophia).¹⁵⁴ The message ultimate realization of identity with the *daemon* is regarded as a shift of consciousness. The individual then experiences the “kingdom of heaven” as the divine unity within all things, suggested for Freke and Gandy in of Consciousness is captured by the Jesus of the *Gospel of Thomas* , in Logialogion such as 113, which they read to show Heaven is simply a shift in consciousness into recognizing the divine unity within all things.¹⁵⁵ Jesus’ rebellion from Jewish social mores indicates that Gnosis requires subversion of publically shared beliefs.¹⁵⁶ Moreover, the Gnostics show that the original Christianity included an adaptation of the Pagan Goddess (such as Demeter) in Sophia. On Freke and Gandy’s reading,

Although the “Jesus Mysteries” thesis is undeniably interesting and provocative, much of Freke and Gandy’s argument is based on specious, stretched, or poor evidence. To prove the

¹⁴⁹ Ibid 110.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid 124.

¹⁵¹ Freke and Gandy, *Jesus and the Lost Goddess* 2001, 130-161.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 115. Their reference here is to *Thomas the Contender*.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid 82-94.

¹⁵⁵ Freke and Gandy 2007*Gospel of the Second Coming*, 85 ; GosThom II.2.51.13-18.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid 119.

nativity fits to the Osiris-Dionysus mythos, for example, they assert Jesus was born from ‘a temporary shelter or cave.’¹⁵⁸ To put Jesus in a cave they challenge common translations of *katalema* as stable. The reference is to Luke 2:7, where Jesus is born in the manger (φάντη) because there was not a place in the καταλύματι (not *katalema*), and therefore does not place Jesus in a cave even if their translation was correct (which it is not). Their footnote to justify the reading is not to the Greek, but to a citation of the work of Ian Wilson *Jesus: The Evidence*, himself not a scholar but a journalist.¹⁵⁹ Stretched interpretations abound in the work. *Allogenes*, for example, is made to read as an allegorical depiction of the eidolon being guided into interiority by a Goddess.¹⁶⁰ He is guided by Youel, who is an angelic luminary, and certainly not a goddess. Such misreadings can be cited *ad infinitum*.

Despite the historical errors, Freke and Gandy’s counter-memory of Jesus is a remarkably straightforward example of how historical revision can seek to revivify the symbols Christianity. It is ripe with historical errors. The binary that Freke and Gandy depict between Literalists and Gnostics in the ancient world is keyed to the present on both sides. “Literalism” critiques the Evangelical doctrine of biblical inerrancy, the early Church’s stomping out of Gnosticism offers a direct parallel to current religious intolerance, and the anti-philosophical stance of Literalists resonates in the denial of scientific theories of evolution or the Big Bang.¹⁶¹ It is fundamentalism they refer to when they state “religion is the Devil’s greatest achievement.”¹⁶² Gnostics, by contrast, serve up a paradigm for contemporary “spiritual but not religious” individuals in their religious tolerance, embrace of the feminine, deliberate psychological approach, and denial of organized religiosity.¹⁶³

Ultimately, Freke and Gandy see their resurrection of the Gnostic Jesus as an ethical necessity. *The Laughing Jesus*, written in the wake of 9/11 and the Iraq war, expands their historical deconstruction to early Judaism and Islam as well. Their point, simply, is that no Literalist Monotheism is adapted to democracy, science, pluralism, or Enlightenment humanism.¹⁶⁴ In a globalized world, religious tolerance is the *sine qua non* for peace. Gnostic syncretism had pointed in this direction, and a contemporary “Gnostic Renaissance” could

¹⁵⁸ Freke and Gandy 1999, 32.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid 263n46; Wilson, *Jesus: The Evidence* 1984, 52.

¹⁶⁰ Freke and Gandy 2006 *The Laughing Jesus*, 177.

¹⁶¹ Freke and Gandy 2006 *Ibid.*, 77-81.

¹⁶² Freke and Gandy, 2001 *The Lost Goddess*, 186.

¹⁶³ Freke and Gandy 1999 *Jesus Mysteries*, 89-131; Freke and Gandy 2001 *Lost Goddess*, 187-204; Freke and Gandy 2006 *Laughing Jesus*,

¹⁶⁴ Freke and Gandy 2006 *The Laughing Jesus*, 105-111.

revivify the symbols of these great traditions without giving them credence to murder, rape, or bomb those who believe differently.¹⁶⁵

Jesus the Jewish Kabbalist

Perhaps the most important turn in historical Jesus studies in the twentieth century was to place Jesus of Nazareth in his Jewish context. He exegeted Jewish scripture, observed many (and consciously transgressed other) Jewish customs, and spoke Aramaic. His disciples were Jewish. His critiques of Sadducees and Pharisees were intra-religious, rather than the promotion of a new religion. The synoptic gospels require familiarity with the Jewish thought-world.

The Nag Hammadi Library influenced this project primarily through *Thomas*. As noted in discussion of the Jesus Seminar, *Thomas* aids in reconstructing the “voice-print” of Jesus of Nazareth and indicates Jesus may have preached a realized eschatology in line with Wisdom literature. Within the culture at large, however, the Jewish Jesus reconstructed from *Thomas* and the Nag Hammadi can be much different. Jesus is a Kabbalistic prophet of Kabbalah, the esoteric Jewish tradition which is evidenced in literature such as the Merkabah and Hekaloth texts, *The Zohar*, and the writings of Isaac Luria. The origins of Kabbalah are commonly found in the Merkabah literature which dates from the post-rabbinical era. Keizer, however, argues that Translation, canonization, and church orthodoxy are said to have obscured the Kabbalistic references in his Jesus’s original teachings. In most instances, this alternative memory is a means of validating an esoteric tradition broadly construed: Kabbalah, Hermetism, magic, alchemy, theurgy, up through magical orders like the Golden Dawn. The Nag Hammadi becomes an early exemplar of Christian Kaballah.¹⁶⁶

One author, however, goes much further than most.

Lewis Keizer

Lewis Keizer, PhD (Graduate Theological Union, 1973), wrote the first dissertation on *The Eighth Reveals the Ninth*, a Hermetic text from the sixth codex. His subsequent career balanced religious and academic pursuits. Keizer resigned from the Episcopal church in which he

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 111-123. “A New Gnostic Renaissance” 120-123.

¹⁶⁶ The paradigmatic author in this regard is certainly Tau Malachi. Malachi’s form of Gnosticism is indebted to the esoteric lineage, and his Jesus is both the purveyor and heart of Christian Kaballah. See Malachi, *The Gnostic Gospel of Saint Thomas*.

had been trained in order to be ordained as an Independent Bishop within the Catholic Tradition in 1975. He has since been one of the foremost spokesman for the independent tradition in America, giving innumerable lectures and self-publishing “The Wandering Bishops” in 2000, an insider’s view of the independent sacramental tradition.¹⁶⁷ As an academic, he has written books ranging from Old Testament bibliographies and a Coptic grammar to historical Jesus reconstructions.¹⁶⁸ Keizer taught comparative religions and ancient languages at UC Santa Cruz for three decades. Keizer’s late-career writings bridge his religious and scholarly quests. He has written extensively about the historical Jesus. In these works, Keizer utilizes his facility in Greek, Coptic, Hebrew, and Aramaic to, in his words, “reverse engineer” the sayings of Jesus found in Greek, Coptic, Hebrew, and Aramaic found back into his original language. We do have back to Yeshua’s thought-world.

Keizer’s Kabbalistic Jesus

For Keizer, the Jesus of history was lost beneath faulty translations and misunderstandings from the beginnings of the Christian movement. Paul associates Jesus with the Messiah ben-David, a holy warrior who will descend to institute God’s Kingdom on earth.¹⁶⁹ In his turn to the Gentiles, Paul adopted Greek mystery religion language and practices that were alien to Yeshua (Keizer’s name to differentiate the Jesus of memory from the Yeshua of history) of Nazareth. Yeshua’s apostles also lost touch with his teachings. He argues that Pentecost shows Christianity became a charismatic movement in its earliest days, one that privileged inspiration from the Holy Spirit above meditative examination of Jesus’ own teachings.¹⁷⁰ The canonical gospels further obscured the historical Jesus by presenting him as the *Messiah ben-Joseph* – Isaiah’s suffering servant – who would return to establish God’s Kingdom as the *Messiah ben-David*.¹⁷¹ That is, the canonical authors combined two Messianic doctrines to present Jesus, neither of which could be found in Yeshua’s teachings. In the fourth century Bishop Athanasius had heretics beaten, kidnapped, framed, tortured, and murdered to discourage dissent

¹⁶⁷ A list of Keizer’s publications and lectures may be found at <http://www.hometemple.org/directors.htm>. He regularly updates a youtube channel with his lectures that can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/user/lewiskeizer>. “The Wandering Bishops” was self-published and is available <http://www.hometemple.org/wanbishweb%20complete.pdf>. Since he wrote this an academic treatment of the Independent Catholic movement has been produced. See Byrne, *The Other Catholics: Remaking America’s Largest Tradition* (2016).

¹⁶⁸ Keizer, 1983. (*The Authentic Jesus: A Guide to Aramaic Idioms, Recent Research, and the Original Message of Jesus Christ*. Saint Thomas Press.)

¹⁶⁹ Keizer, *Kabbalistic Teachings of Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas* 2010, loc 657.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid 868.

¹⁷¹ Ibid 176.

from orthodoxy.¹⁷² Gnostics also obscured Yeshua's teachings. While *Thomas* contains "kernel" sayings of Jesus, many logia have been "Gnosticized" over time to reflect anti-feminist, elitist, and dualistic doctrines alien to Yeshua of Nazareth.¹⁷³

To uncover the historical Jesus, Greek and Coptic sayings have to be reverse engineered back to the original Aramaic.¹⁷⁴ *Thomas* is key. It remains nearest to the Aramaic form and terminology Jesus would have used when delivering *razim*, or mystery teachings, to his inner circle disciples.¹⁷⁵ Keizer argues that these *razim* reveal Yeshua was steeped in early oral Kabbalah.¹⁷⁶ The "Kingdom" of God, or Greek βασιλεία, would have translated *Malkuth*, Aramaic for "sovereignty" and a reference to the tenth Sephiroth. Use of βασιλεία helped promote the misunderstanding Yeshua foretold a *Messiah ben David* who would conquer Rome and return Jerusalem to the Hebrews. *Malkuth*, in Keizer's reconstruction, is a community of those who have been divinely reborn and bring this consciousness of the divine into action on earth.¹⁷⁷ As God's "sovereignty" is instituted on earth, the other Sephirothic qualities of the divine – Wisdom, Justice, Beauty, Love, Truth, Mercy, etc. – would begin to manifest.¹⁷⁸ The realized eschatology of logia such as 3 and 113 reflect that *Malkuth* is already present but needs to be activated in the hearts of individual human beings. Yeshua's authentic inner teachings concern the nature of the *Malkuth* and the practices necessary for it to be realized.

Keizer argues that Jesus initiated his closest disciples into realization of the *Malkuth*. He taught that each heart is divided between good and evil inclinations (Aramaic: the *yetzer ha-tov* and *yetzer ha-ra*). As evidenced in logion 98, on the man who drew a sword in his own house, Yeshua's inner *halakah* (Hebrew: collective body of religious laws) required constant inner vigilance against the *yetzer ha-ra*: "This is an allegory of spiritual practice through constant introspection and self-awareness of motivation, intent, and the *yetzerim* or impulses of the heart."¹⁷⁹ Inner sanctification was a life-long process of purifying the temporal soul, or *nephesh*, so that the divine individual essence, or *neshemah*, escapes rebirth.¹⁸⁰ Logion 22, on the inner

¹⁷² *ibid* 317

¹⁷³ *ibid* 380. Keizer, like so many in the reception of *Thomas*, invokes DeConick's hypothesis of a "rolling corpus" to locate early "kernel" sayings of Yeshua. See loc 503

¹⁷⁴ *ibid* 340.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid* 765.

¹⁷⁶ Keizer argues that such an early oral Kabbalah can be inferred from 2nd Temple Apocalyptic literature and later writings like the *Sefer Yetzirah*, *Bahir*, and *Heckaloth* literature. See loc 680-714.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid* Loc 609.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid* 609-615.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid*, loc 2686,

¹⁸⁰ *ibid* loc 5098.

becoming the outer, elucidates how such vigilance is a path to “inner alchemy” or “tantra of divine transformation” wherein the *yetzer ha-tov* is recognized to be the divine image.¹⁸¹

This The achievement of the “inner becoming the outer” is accomplished through Yeshua’s most secret teaching, the *razim* (secrets or inner mysteries) of the *Merkabah* (chariot). Merkabah mysticism is a form of visionary Jewish mysticism that sought visionary experiences of YHVH’s chariot or ascent into His palaces to witness YHVH on this throne (*Hekhaloth*).¹⁸² While the literature of Hekhaloth and Merkabah mysticism derive from the middle ages, Keizer argues that an early form of this mysticism was practiced in 1st century Palestine and that Yeshua was a practitioner.

Yeshua led a select few of his disciples on a visionary meditation into the third heaven, or *Pardes*.¹⁸³ Evidence for this meditation is found not only in extra-canonical sources such as *Secret Mark*, where the robed disciple and Jesus keep an all-night vigil, or *The Gospel of Mary*, which suggests Jesus granted Mary vision (BG8502, 1,10.10-17.7). It is also found in encoded form within the synoptic gospels in the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-9, Mark 9:2-8, Luke 9:28-36). On Keizer’s reading, the Transfiguration shows Jesus elevating his disciples into *Pardes* where the true *tzadikim* (saints, here Moses and Elijah) reside.¹⁸⁴

Keizer also sees the ritual of the “bridal chamber” spoken of in texts like *The Gospel of Philip* and *Thomas* as the prototype of the Kabbalistic doctrine of *Tikkun* (restoration). Tikkun is t, of the archetypal re-joining of male and female qualities aspects of the divine split that had been split in twain by the creation of Adam and Eve.e The vision of *Pardes* is the restoration. in *Pardes*.¹⁸⁵ This ritual (re-)union is behind references to the Bridal Chamber ritual mentioned in *The Gospel of Philip* and *Thomas*.¹⁸⁶ Purification of the *neshemah* cultivated a divine, non-dual form of awareness akin to the Buddha nature.¹⁸⁷

The proto-orthodox church and the Gnostics also misinterpreted Yeshua’s self-understanding. Yeshua did conceive of himself as the Son of Man, but not *uniquely* so. Influenced by apocryphal literature, Yeshua identified with the *Messiah bar-Enash*, which he

¹⁸¹ *ibid* loc 2725.

¹⁸² See Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, 74-124. Scholem, *Major Trends*, 40-79; Halperin, *Faces of the Chariot*; Schäfer, *The Hidden and Manifest God*.

¹⁸³ *Ibid* loc 2447.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid* loc 989-997.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid*, loc 2714.

¹⁸⁶ *ibid* loc 2632.

¹⁸⁷ Loc 2658.

also referred to as the Second Adam (as preserved by Paul).¹⁸⁸ According to Keizer, the *Messiah bar-Enash* is not exclusive. It is the corporate, divine consciousness shared by individuals who have achieved divine rebirth and enact *Malkuth* on earth.¹⁸⁹ The divine consciousness it cultivates yields abilities akin to *siddhis* (powers, often paranormal, achieved by an advanced student of yoga). Ascent into *Pardes* meant that all beings of lower levels, including *elilim* (evil spirits under control of the *qilipoth*), or even angels, were under Yeshua's command.¹⁹⁰ Healing and exorcism are natural expressions of such *siddhis*. Last, Yeshua's resurrection appearances reflect his attainment of the *bar Enash*. In Keizer's Kabbalah, the *nephesh*, translated in English as "soul" and Greek as ψυχή, survives bodily death for six weeks before dissolving into its constituent parts. Realizing consciousness of the *neshemah* in life allowed Jesus to maintain conscious control of his *nephesh* and interact with his disciples before ascending to *Pardes*.¹⁹¹

Keizer's Kabbalistic Yeshua is a social and spiritual prophet. The notion of the *Messiah bar Enash* is profoundly democratic and humanistic. Every human is Messiah *ien potentia*. Consciousness of one's true nature is occluded by greed, material possessions, and wealth. Mindful practice ("be passersby") and introspective vigilance against evil (Logion 98) help clear the mind for realization of *Malkuth*. For Keizer, the Sovereignty that manifests through individual humans is evidenced by shifts in western culture since Yeshua's time: democratic individualism, civil liberties, wealth redistribution, and freedom of thought. In essence, the doctrine of *Malkuth* is a social gospel. Human life is a necessary stage for *neshemah* to purify themselves through self-realization and subsequent social action. Religious and social pluralism are embraced. Yeshua's message resonates with concepts of the Buddha nature, tantric yab-yum practices, and shamanic flights of the soul. Finally, Yeshua offers a message of re-enchantment that does not defy science. If Jesus' resurrection appearances are read according to Kabbalistic theory, then individual survival of death must be possible. And insofar as the Kabbalah included practical divine sciences, especially visionary magic, spiritual technologies are legitimized by Yeshua himself.

The Electric Jesus

¹⁸⁸ Ibid Loc 660.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid loc 662.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid loc 3163, exegeting logion 35.

¹⁹¹ Ibid loc 7430.

Jonathan Talat Phillips is a major figure in “consciousness culture,” a counterculture associated with Burning Man and concerned with integrating eco-consciousness, sustainability, technology, and spirituality. Along with author Daniel Pinchbeck, he launched the website Reality Sandwich.¹⁹² He has written and spoken about his return to Christianity through a sequence of religious experiences and readings of the Nag Hammadi codices. In his memoir *The Electric Jesus: The Healing Journey of a Contemporary Gnostic*, Phillips recounts his youth in a Methodist church, his suffering from depression in his teens and twenties, and his healing through an encounter with psychedelics and “the Electric Jesus.” What makes Phillips’ autobiography so compelling for this study is the way it integrates alternative Christian memory with personal exploration and healing. *The Electric Jesus* conveys how reinterpretations of the past not only legitimize new practices as Christian, but that the desire to do so extends beyond issues of power and discourse. Phillips seeks healing. His re-attachment to Christian symbols is guided by affect and yearning.

Raised Methodist in a small mining town in Colorado, Phillips recalls “hating” church as a child. Nevertheless, Phillips was attached to Christian symbolism and interpreted the world through it.¹⁹³ After watching a violent depiction of the Rapture in film at ten years old, for example, Phillips was plagued with nightmares of Jesus standing “on a mountain of broken, tortured bodies, victoriously holding a sword above his head while surveying the bombed gray landscape around him. Every morning I feared the coming slaughter of the Tribulation.”¹⁹⁴ As a teenager, though his mother would praise Phillips’ accomplishments to neighbors—school president, valedictorian, prom king—she rarely displayed affection at home. Instead, she was prone to fits of anger, openly wishing Phillips and his siblings “had never been born.”¹⁹⁵ It is no surprise he would suffer depression through much of his life. Phillips describes his depression symbolically as the “black bowling ball” in his stomach.¹⁹⁶

In his college years and twenties Phillips was utterly disillusioned with Christianity, becoming a self-described “cynical secular materialist.”¹⁹⁷ He became enthralled by Beat Generation, frequenting the same bars as Kerouac and Neal Cassady, writing until dawn, and

¹⁹² <http://realitysandwich.com/u/talat-jonathan-phillips/>

¹⁹³ Phillips 2011*Electric Jesus*, 53.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁹⁵ Phillips 2011*Ibid.*, 53–61.

¹⁹⁶ Phillips 2011*Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁹⁷ Phillips 2011*Ibid.*, 1.

indulging in alcohol and sex as much as his literary heroes.¹⁹⁸ He spent a few years as an expat author in Prague but returned to the United States after 9/11 and became an anti-war demonstrator. Nicknaming himself “General Johnny America” and wearing a George Washington overcoat, sky blue pants and vest, and sliver silver stars from his ankles to his shoulders, Phillips was the leader of the street-media team “Green Dragon.” But when George W. Bush was re-elected in 2004 Phillips’s hopes for a revolution were crushed. Green Dragon disbanded.

It was during this period, in the midst of a depression, that Phillips discovered the Nag Hammadi codices and began to reinterpret the symbols of Christianity through them. His interpretations attempt to make sense of a sequence of psychedelic experiences while also connecting the Christian symbolic order to Eastern religious traditions, an “enlightenment of the body (see below),” and a re-enchantment of the world that adapt the symbol of Jesus to a modernized world.¹⁹⁹

Phillips interprets his own journey towards healing under the paradigm of mythicist Christianity as presented by Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy. Phillips is influenced by their ideas in three ways.²⁰⁰ First, he structures his memoir to fit the dying-rising godman myth, identifying with the symbol of Christ as a paradigm of self-transformation. Second, the ample parallels Freke and Gandy cite between Jesus and figures like Osiris draws the Christian symbolic order into a universal frame of reference that legitimizes Phillips’s own connections between the gnostics and Tantra. Third, for Freke and Gandy canonical and noncanonical gospels are gnostic in the sense of being allegories that encode the mystery religion of Christianity.²⁰¹ Phillips in turn reads the New Testament with the same eyes as the Nag Hammadi codices.²⁰²

Phillips’s reinterpretation of Jesus presumes that a doctrine of an underlying metaphysical body is found cross-culturally. With what Phillips’ practices can be understood with reference to what Jeffrey Kripal calls an “enlightenment of the body.” By this, Kripal means that such metaphysical body doctrines (often in the modern period of a Tantric lineage or accentually Tantric) undergird embodied practices that catalyze and cultivate altered states of

¹⁹⁸ Phillips, *Electric Jesus* 2011, 61

¹⁹⁹ On re-enchantment as a response to disenchantment and modernization, see Partridge 2004.

²⁰⁰ For Phillips’s adoption of these ideas, see: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jonathan-talat-phillips/gnosis-mystical-history-of-jesus_b_1199493.html

²⁰¹ Freke and Gandy 1999 *Jesus Mysteries*, 89–132.

²⁰² Phillips, Skype interview with author, Sept. 11, 2015.

consciousness and energy.²⁰³ For Phillips, the counter- memory opened up by the gnostics and their texts allows him to reinterpret Christianity in terms of a Tantric enlightenment of the body. He reads Logion 106 of the Gospel of Thomas, “When you make the two one, you will become children of Adam, and when you say ‘Mountain, move away from here!’ it will move” as a Christian recognition of the Tantric concept of the *ida* and *pingala* channels which rise up from the lowest chakra, encircling one another through the remaining seven until rising up and through the crown chakra at the top of the skull.²⁰⁴ Significantly, in his rendering of this passage Phillips substitutes “children of Adam” for “sons of man” (ἱἰωὴρε ἱἰρωμε) in an effort to read this state of non-duality as a return to Eden. For Phillips, Eden represents a counter-modern vision of neo-tribalism, ecological conservation, and sustainability.²⁰⁵

Conscious realization of non-duality is accomplished by release of the kundalini energy that shoots up the *sushumna*, a central channel through the chakras that evaporates the polarity of the *ida* and *pingala* in its tremendous rush of force.²⁰⁶ For Phillips, the gnostic Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden symbolizes the Tantric “enlightened body.” In the ecstasy of rising kundalini, “spiritual adepts pass through the veil of ego death and find themselves in communion with the “ineffable,” “eternal,” and “immeasurable light”” surrounding the Invisible Spirit in the Apocryphon of John.²⁰⁷ In essence, Phillips sees the metaphysical body as a universal that leads to distinct but comparable practices in different cultural contexts.

Phillips further interprets gnostics and the Jesus of history as “healers” who recognized this underlying spiritual energy base to the body. Informed by Freke and Gandy, Phillips believes *soter* (σωτήρ) did not initially mean “Savior,” but was a means to signify the healing miracles of mythic godmen such as Asclepius.²⁰⁸ Jesus’s healing miracles were energetic acts that shifted the auras of the ill back into alignment.²⁰⁹ Gnostics (“pneumatics”) encode energetic healing in their language of *pneuma*, a Greek synonym for *ruah*, *qi*, *prana*, and *mana*.²¹⁰ Baptism is a matter of

²⁰³ For Jeffrey Kripal’s “enlightenment of the body,” see Kripal 2007, 22. This Tantric notion is dependent upon both the body and consciousness being understood as expressions of divine energy that can be awakened, harnessed, and channeled.

²⁰⁴ Phillips 2011Ibid, 104. See Gos. Thom. NHCNag Hammadi Codices II,2 50.18–22.

²⁰⁵ IbidPhillips 2011, 21.

²⁰⁶ IbidPhillips 2011, 105.

²⁰⁷ IbidPhillips 2011, 105. See Ap. John NHCNag Hammadi Codices II,1 6.11–12

²⁰⁸ IbidPhillips 2011, 78. Freke and Gandy 1999*Jesus Mysteries*, 37–42.

²⁰⁹ Phillips, *The Electric Jesus* Phillips 2011, 116.

²¹⁰ IbidPhillips 2011, 116. Phillips apparently accepts the equation between the Paul’s language of *pneumatikos* (1 Cor 15), Valentinian *pneumatikoi* and the more general category of Gnostic made between Freke and Gandy throughout their work. See Freke and Gandy 1999*Jesus Mysteries*, 168-170 and *Idem* 2001, 68-78. *Ruah* is Hebrew for “spirit.” *Qi* is Mandarin for “air, breath” and is most commonly associated in an American context with the practice of Tai Chi. *Prana* is Sanskrit for “breath” and is associated with practices in *prana yoga*. *Mana* is Maori

transmitting this spiritual energy from master to disciple, as when the living Jesus intoxicates a disciple with “the bubbling spring that [he] has tended.”²¹¹ Baptism in “rushing water” is meant to convey this underlying energetic conception.²¹² Jesus and the gnostics are therefore practitioners of energy healing that secularized medicine has not caught up to.

In both content and interpretation, Phillips’s psychedelic experiences utilize gnostic-Christian symbolism to show his reattachment to the tradition through psychological healing. During an Ayahuasca ceremony Phillips finds himself visited by his spirit guides, alien beings who appear to him in various states of consciousness throughout the memoir. He suddenly feels “a blinding light open up above me, descending into my crown chakra, filling my entire body with energy. *It was what I had imagined early Christian baptisms to be like ... white energy gushed through my meridians, pumping pleasant sensations through my body. I was charged to the point of being overwhelmed.*”²¹³ His guides inform him he had become like Christ, Buddha, or Krishna, an enlightened being returned to the Edenic state.²¹⁴ Although Phillips does not draw attention to this, his own visionary experience recapitulates his own interpretations of the anointing of the Son with the Light of the Father to become Christ in the Apocryphon of John.²¹⁵

The psychological healing Phillips sought is also accomplished through re-attachment to the Christian symbolic order. Phillips became a public speaker after Reality Sandwich went live. In one of these talks, he spontaneously began speaking about the role of Christ and the gnostics in his healing journey. Later that evening, Phillips’s guides informed him they had a message from Jesus. As Phillips tells it, a “sermon” came down as a holographic image the size of a volleyball that downloaded into his heart chakra. The guides informed him that the message encoded “healing vectors” that he could transmit when talking about Jesus. The hologram descended down his chakras until:

the black bowling ball in my stomach lurched upward. It rotated clockwise and then pulsated rapidly, until a pool of dark energies broke through my pelvis and rushed down my legs and out the soles of my feet. . . I felt purified. Thank you Jesus, I

for “pervasive supernatural power.” Phillips equates all of these as spirit power that can be used for healing and to cultivate altered states of consciousness and energy.

²¹¹ Gos. Thom. NHCNag Hammadi Codices II,2 35.4–8.

²¹² Phillips, Skype interview with author, Sept. 11, 2015.

²¹³ Phillips 2011*Electric Jesus*, 124–125; emphasis mine.

²¹⁴ Phillips 2011*Ibid*, 125.

²¹⁵ Phillips 2011*Ibid*, 80; Ap. John NHCNag Hammadi Codices II,1 6.15–31. See parallels in Ap. John NHCNag Hammadi Codices III,1 9.2–11 and BG8502,2 30.2–11.

found myself saying.²¹⁶

In that moment two things happened. First, the bowling ball of depression is a representation of his own narcissistic injury, now healed. When downloading the sermon he sees an image of his mother and reinterprets her abuse as necessary for him to transmute his own ills into love and compassion for all, including her.²¹⁷ A second meaning is found in a new Christology. He concluded from this experience that Jesus must not merely be a mythic prototype, but “a vast and complex cosmic plane, an overarching energy structure that stretched across realms of the divine pleroma.”²¹⁸

In many public talks since, Phillips has found that his yearning to reconnect with Christian symbols is hardly unique. Many attendees of his talks thank him for allowing them to feel like a Christian again.²¹⁹ Phillips hopes to revivify Christian practice from within the churches themselves. In his estimation the orthodox churches are “imitation churches” that have become the “dry canals” spoken of in the *Revelation of Peter*.²²⁰ Phillips sees, however, that a new religion is beside the point insofar as it fails to integrate the Christian tradition that undergirds Western culture. What is needed is for the established churches to enhance “their services with meditation, prayer, breath work, energy healing, body movement, possibly even late-night dancing, and among the more radicalized, the dispensing of psychoactive sacraments.”²²¹

Conclusion

The counter-memories read out of the Nag Hammadi and analyzed in this chapter are various: a witty secular sage, a tantric guru, a sex-magician father, a Kabbalistic prophet, a metaphysical healer, even a myth contrived by Jewish mystics. Every author casts Jesus in a mold fit to their his own needs, desires, and hopes. A quote from Stephen Prothero proves true:

²¹⁶ Phillips 2011 Phillips, *Electric Jesus*, 184.

²¹⁷ Phillips 2011 Ibid, 184.

²¹⁸ Phillips 2011 Ibid, 184. It should be noted that this Christology does not necessitate that Jesus was a flesh-and-blood, historical human. Daniel Pinchbeck has hypothesized that the Imaginal is imprinted by conscious awareness. When enough individuals focus on a particular imaginative product it may become self-aware and active from within the Imaginal space. Phillips would of course be familiar with this theory since he is Pinchbeck’s editor and business partner.

²¹⁹ Phillips, Skype interview with author, Sept. 11, 2015.

²²⁰ Apoc. Pet. NHC Nag Hammadi Codices VII,3 30.1

²²¹ Phillips, 2011 *Electric Jesus*, 82.

“to see how Americans of all stripes have cast the man from Nazareth in their own image is to examine, through the looking glass, the kaleidoscopic character of American culture.”²²² There is nonetheless a pattern within the kaleidoscopic series of Jesus images presented in this chapter. The Nag Hammadi codices have been a resource for those religious outsiders in American culture to imagine a new Jesus beyond the tradition.

Who is this Jesus? He celebrates embodiment. His embodied spiritual technologies range from hatha yoga to metaphysical Reiki healing. In sharp contrast to most of the Nag Hammadi texts, this Jesus is an advocate of sexuality and even utilizes it to catalyze higher states of awareness. As Freke and Gandy like to say, “[if you think] sex is evil, you must be doing it wrong.”²²³ Though the concepts of the body underlying the different technologies differ, none advocate a dualist or asomatic view – despite the abundance of such anthropologies in the NHCNag Hammadi Codices themselves. Moreover, American democracy and individualism is refracted through the figure of Jesus. Jesus has been demoted from the unique Son of Man to a sage, guru, or rabbi. He symbolizes the complete realization of divinity-in-life that is available to all humans.

The teachings of this Jesus embrace religious pluralism indirectly through the comparative practices of the authors. Proportionally, most of the authors in this chapter relate Jesus’ teachings from *The Gospel of Thomas* to Asian religionsreligious currents, whether Tantra, Upanishadic and Bhakti Hinduism, Taoism, Zen, Mahayana, or the Buddha himself. But that is not all. Shamanism, Kabbalah, alchemy, and Sufism are often cited as parallels too. This suggests that one motivation for culling counter-memories from the Nag Hammadi codices is to proffer a form of Christianity that is not merely ecumenical and tolerant, but radically inclusive and open.

The Jesuses of countermemory combat the problem of disenchantment. Again and again the authors in this chapter cite Jesus’ teachings on the realized Kingdom, particularly logia 3 and 113 of *Thomas*. The dead earth is reinterpreted as living ecstatic energy. Realization of the Kingdom is a shift in conscious awareness which is framed in psychodynamic terms. Jesus is reimagined as a psychagogue. For authors in this chapter like OshoRajneesh, Newman, and Freke, the ancient teachings attributed to Jesus predicted the insights of Freud and Jung. By framing the religion in psychodynamic, rather than social, terms, these authors reflect the shift towards the introspective and individualist forms of spirituality prominent in the “cultic milieu.”

²²² Prothero, *American Jesus*, 7.

²²³ Freke and Gandy, *Jesus and the Lost Goddess*, 194.

Finally, it is as important to note who this newly imagined Jesus is not. He is not the Jesus of the creeds. The *kerygma* is forgotten, the atonement is unthinkable, and the virgin birth is at best a useful fiction. All of the authors in this chapter impute that early writers in orthodox Christian tradition either unintentionally or deliberately obscured the true Jesus of history. Examples of the unintentional include misinterpretations of his life and teachings that convey Apocalyptic prophecy and sectarianism. Deliberate obfuscation is more nefarious. The early church achieves its authoritarian power by forcefully excising certain truths: Jesus' lost years in India, his marriage and child, or the fact he never existed. In any case, the early church has been discounted as an authority. Crucially, the early church is keyed to present forms of Christianity in specific ways. Insofar as the ancient church is authoritarian, power-hungry, and close-minded, so too are certain forms of contemporary Christianity, typically Evangelical. Denial of Jesus' Gnostic teachings is a parallel to the inability of present-day churches to accept America's unprecedented pluralism. And the dogmatic insistence on supernatural miracles in Jesus' biography is made to paint all Evangelicals as fundamentalists who deny the Big Bang or evolutionary theory.

Chapter Two

Gnostic Christians to Lost ChristianitiesLost Christianities

“Imagine a Christianity that has been lost to us, a Christianity that celebrated the wisdom of all sacred texts, all religions, that valued women, that believed God existed inside all of us, that there was no need for mediation, no need for priests or rabbis. That we could each find God on our own, without a Church. *That’s* the Christianity that has been lost to us.” Bastian in Malarkey, *Resurrection*¹

“*A New New Testament’s* more diverse picture of Christian beginnings supports the possibility that Christian practice and belief in our day might birth new and different ways of seeing God, morality, worship, human sexuality, and work. . . the tension between *A New New Testament* and the “master narrative” clears a spiritual space in our day for authentic new developments in Christianity.” ~ Hal Taussig²

“The heretics were right.” ~ Gilles Quispel³

Introduction

In the decades following the Nag Hammadi find, scholars and media came to associate the library with the historical figures referred to as the Gnostics. The very first English language article about the find made this connection: “Gnostic Gospels of 150 A.D. Found; Throw Light on Early Christianity.”⁴ In this New York Times article, H.C. Peuch speculated in the article that the Jung Codex “was almost entirely written by Valentinus himself.” Jean Doresse, the French scholar who had the most complete access to the texts until the facsimile photographs were published, argued the library belonged a “Sethian gnostic sect” in *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics*.⁵ Hans Jonas added a chapter entitled “Recent Discoveries in the Field of Gnosticism” to his influential *The Gnostic Religion* in 1963 to discuss the library as a collection

¹ The character Bastian in Malarkey, *Resurrection*, 34-35.

² Taussig, “What’s New in *A New New Testament*,” 520.

³ Farmer, “An Interview with Gilles Quispel,” in *Gnosis* issue 1, 27.

⁴ “Gnostic Gospels of 150 A.D. Found; Throw Light on Early Christianity,” New York Times, Nov 16, 1953.

⁵ Doresse, *Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics*, 194-195.

of Egyptian Gnostic writings.⁶ Major encyclopedias, such as the Encyclopedia Britannica and Encyclopedia of Philosophy, placed discussion of the Nag Hammadi under entries for “Gnosticism.”⁷ The first major academic colloquium on the Nag Hammadi texts, held in Messina, Italy, was entitled “The Origins of Gnosticism.” And the translation team at Claremont responsible for *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* assumed the title “The Coptic Gnostic Library Project.”

The pervasive influence of this association between the Gnostics and the NHC obscures a fundamental tension in the cultural memory. On the one hand, the Gnostic personified a religious form that was separate and independent from early Christianity. Gnosticism encompassed non-Christian religions (Mandaeism) and problem cases (Manicheism) from the ancient Mediterranean.⁸ Moreover, gnosis as “knowledge of the divine mysteries reserved for an elite” could be found in religions beyond the ancient Mediterranean, such as Buddhism.⁹ On the other hand, the NHC features figures of Jewish-Christian memory, including Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Adam and Eve. The most popular texts from the collection—*The Gospels of Thomas, Truth, Phillip*, and *The Apocryphon of John*—feature presentations of Christ that depart from traditional memory. Compositions from Valentinus and the Valentinians show self-described Christians composed at least some of the NHC.

It is not my intention to take a side in the so-called “Gnostic Wars” and determine to what extent the NHC should be ascribed to ancient Gnostics or ancient Christians.¹⁰ As a reception historian, the “Gnostic Wars” themselves are an object of analysis. My concern is how both aspects of this war have led to distinctive *religious* receptions in America. Readers who interpret the NHC as texts from early, lost Christianities do so in ways that depart significantly

⁶ Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 290-319.

⁷ Jonas, “Gnosticism,” 331-342 in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* vol 3, 1967 (1972 reprint). R.M. Grant, “Gnosticism,” in *The Encyclopedia Britannica*.

⁸ The association between Gnosticism and the Mandaean and Manichean religions was a standard of early Gnostic Studies.

⁹ The definition of *gnosis* is derived from the Messina Colloquium. See Bianchi, *Le Origini della Gnosticismo*, 11. The connection between *gnosis* and Buddhism was charted in Conze, “Buddhism and Gnosis,” 651-667.

¹⁰ “The Gnostic Wars” refers to the academic debates within Early Christianity and Gnostic Studies concerning the status of ancient Gnostics. On one side of the debate, scholars such as Karen King and Elaine Pagels argue that we have no texts in which the authors *self-identify* as “Gnostic.” Instead, this moniker only appears in heresiological literature and may be a term denoting heresy (akin to calling someone a “Commie” during the Red Scare). On the other side, scholars such as April DeConick and Birger Pearson – in distinct ways – for the continued relevance of the term “Gnostic.” Whether from the vantage point of cognitive-linguistics or morphology, each argue that Gnostic religion (or spirituality) marked out an identifiable and separate movement that interacted with Christianity without being wholly coterminous with it. Key texts in this debate include King, *What is Gnosticism?*; Pagels, *Beyond Belief*; DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age*; Idem, “Gnostic Spirituality at the Crossroads”; Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature*.

from those who see them as the products of Gnostics outside the Christian tradition. Based on these perspectives, distinct counter-memories of whom the ancient Gnostics or alternative Christians develop. One set of readers uses the NHC to broaden the Christian tradition. Another uses the NHC to offer (often vicious) critiques of the Christian tradition and develop new, meaningful relationships to its symbols that break entirely from the church.

This chapter analyzes approaches that read the NHC as products from early, lost Christianities. Such lost Christianities serve as a projection screen in memory for contemporaries to reimagine what the Christian tradition could have been. Counter-memories emerge around both individual Gnostic-Christians and Gnostics in conflict with heresiologists. The Gnostic-Christian Valentinus (100-160 CE) is central. His failed bid to become the Bishop at Rome serves as a counter-possibility of the utmost import. Had he won, western Christianity would have developed in radically different ways. Alternately, the Gnostics as a whole are presented in opposition to early heresiologists. Irenaeus of Lyons (130-202 CE) and Bishop Athanasius (296-373 CE), most especially, are painted as close-minded and dogmatic leaders of the early Roman Church. In their efforts to politically unify Christianity (through shared beliefs and a shared canon, respectively) they are seen to have suppressed the more introspective, tolerant, and mystical aspects of early Christianity. The NHC presents a possibility for these early forms to escape their branding as “heresy” and become again part of the Christian tradition.

The meanings that readers find in these counter-memories have shifted over time. Early readers such as Gilles Quispel and Stephan Hoeller emphasized the NHC as representative of an “inner” or “esoteric” Christianity. Traditional Catholicism provides exoteric teachings, while the NHC can speak to the modern individual yearning for a more introspective, psychological, and mystical approach to Christian symbols. While this emphasis on introspection and mysticism has remained, beginning with Elaine Pagels’ *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979) the NHC increasingly became a resource used to claim contemporary *social* concerns animated early Christianity. More and more, readers began to utilize the NHC Nag Hammadi codices to make claims pertaining to feminism and female roles in the church, gender and sexuality, democratic humanism, religious tolerance, and non-exclusive forms of Christian belief and practice.

In terms of symbolic loss, it must be kept in mind that the Gnostics (or lost Christians) are not religious *symbols* that individuals attach to, such as Jesus Christ or God. Rather, they present an alternative Christian *identity*. Diachronically, this identity existed in early, pre-Nicean Christianity. Synchronically, this identity marks off an alternative approach to Christian belief

and practice that sets it apart from most mainline churches and Evangelical congregations.¹¹ As such, this chapter features biographical studies of influential figures whose turn to the NHC clearly responds to a sense of loss. Many broke away from Evangelical, mainline, or Catholic churches. When they turned to the NHC they found an approach to Christianity that responded to reasons they had to break from them: social concerns; lack of introspection and mysticism; exclusivism and religious intolerance. For these readers, the NHC offers the possibility of revising and expanding the Christian in such a way that they might once again belong.¹²

Gilles Quispel, Valentinus, and *The Gospel of Truth*

The early twentieth century witnessed a revival of interest in the early Christian philosopher Valentinus. G.R.S. Mead of the Theosophical Society remarked that he is “universally acknowledged to have been the greatest of the Gnostics.”¹³ Mead even attributed the recently translated *Pistis Sophia* to Valentinus’ pen. In his doctoral dissertation, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*, Hans Jonas referred to Valentinian thought as the pinnacle of Syrian-Egyptian gnostic speculation. Given this stature of Valentinus inside the academy and without, it is significant that the first codex to be brought out of Egypt – initially named the Eid Codex, later dubbed the *Jung Codex*, and now simply known as Codex One – consisted primarily of Valentinian writings. The codex had come under into the possession of antiquities dealer Albert Eid sometime in 1947.¹⁴ Jean Doresse took photos of pages within it that same year. While Eid was alive, Doresse sought to sell the codex to interested parties (particularly the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France* and the *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* of Louvain), to no avail.

As the other codices of the NHC languished in the Cairo Museum, Eid transported the leaves of his codex (without the leather cover) to his home in Belgium. Eid died in 1950, but his wife Simone continued efforts to sell the codex to interested parties: first the University of Michigan and, later, to the Bollingen Foundation. Yet the situation became ever more complex. Simone had been fined a considerable sum (~\$5000) for her husband smuggling antiquities out

¹¹ On synchronic and diachronic forms of religious identity, see Grieve and Weiss, “Illuminating the Half-Life of Tradition.”

¹² I refer readers to Peter Homans’ discussion of *rapprochement* in *The Ability to Mourn*, 326-343.

¹³ Mead, *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten*, 284.

¹⁴ For the most extensive treatment of the history of the Jung Codex, including an evaluation of Quispel’s first-person accounts, see Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Story*, 351-487.

of Egypt. She was obligated to remain in Alexandria until that situation could be resolved. Only she knew where the manuscript was stored. Publishing houses were hesitant to acquire a manuscript that could prove a forgery, may be of no public interest, and in any case, appeared likely to lead to legal troubles. Exceedingly few people had seen the text, and the synopsis of contents provided by Doresse was scantmeager.¹⁵

Enter Gilles Quispel. A specialist in Patristics, Quispel was a professor at the University of Utrecht. By 1950, he was one of the world's leading scholars on Valentinus (~100-160 CE). Quispel's article "The Original Doctrine of Valentinus" reconstructed Valentinus' own system based upon the disparate and contradictory quotations found in early church fathers such as Irenaeus of Lyon (130-202), Tertulian of Carthage (155-240), and Clement of Alexandria (150-215).¹⁶ After publishing his findings in *Vigiliae Christianae*, he sent a copy of the article to several famous intellectuals, including the psychologist Carl Jung. Jung invited Quispel to the Eranos conference and arranged for him to serve as a Fellow with the Bollingen Foundation.¹⁷

When word of the Eid Codex reached Quispel he turned to Jung for assistance in acquiring it. With the purse and power of Bollingen behind him, Quispel was able to discover the owner, location, and asking price of the mysterious codex. He offered the appropriate sum to Eid while also securing the initial publication rights. Before the sale could be finalized, Bollingen specified that Quispel needed to examine the texts first-hand. In part, the reasoning is obvious: Quispel had to discern whether the texts were genuine and in a suitable condition. But there was more. As Quispel puts it, "even if the writings were genuine it remained [possible] that their contents were *Gnostic speculations of little worth*, whereas what we primarily hoped for was the writings of Valentinus."¹⁸ Knowing what we now do about the Nag Hammadi collection, it would seem that had the codex been any other codex in the collection, Bollingen would not have agreed to purchase it. The fact the Eid codex contained three Valentinian texts, especially *The Gospel of Truth*, led to its sale and publication. The final sale took place May 10, 1952.¹⁹

Quispel's assessments of the Jung Codex have had an enormous impact in the

¹⁵ The letters from Doresse to Peuch concerning the contents of the Eid codex are reprinted in Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Story*, 360-366.

¹⁶ Quispel, "The original Doctrine of Valentinus," 43-73.

¹⁷ The Eranos conferences are meetings of distinguished academics, psychologists, and religious leaders held in Eranos, Switzerland, since 1933. Individuals give papers on a specific theme. Past luminaries include Jung, Quispel, Joseph Campbell, Mircea Eliade, Gershom Scholem, Henry Corbin, and James Hillman. For the most thoroughly researched history of these meetings, see Hakl, *Eranos: An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*.

¹⁸ Quispel, "The Jung Codex and Its Significance," 6.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Anglophone world. Several claims made in his introduction, “The Jung Codex and Its Significance,” are repeated in popular books to this day.²⁰ Three of these claims are of note. First, *Gospel of Truth* is from the pen of Valentinus. As Quispel puts it, “the sensitive language, the elevation of the thought, the powerful style would all seem to indicate that the author was none other than Valentinus himself.”²¹ Due to the *The Gospel of Truth*’s relative “orthodox” character (it lacks explicit reference to the Demiurge or the aeons) Quispel dates it to 140 CE, prior to when Valentinus (supposedly) was passed over for Bishop and (allegedly) left the church. Two other texts are attributed to well-known Valentinians: the *Letter to Rheginos* to Valentinus himself, and *The Treatise on the Three Natures* to Heracleon, but these claims would soon be dismissed.

Second, the Jung codex is set apart as unique amongst the library. In contrast with the Sahidic Coptic used in most of the rest of the the greater part of the Nag Hammadi codicesNHC, the texts within it are composed in the Sub-Akhmimic dialect. Quispel takes this linguistic difference as an indication the texts were assembled by a Valentinian community and only later accepted into the library of these Sethian gnostics. The “learned” gnosis of the Valentinians is therefore separated from the “vulgar” gnosis of the Sethians presented in other texts such as *The Apocryphon of John*.²²

Third, the message of *The Gospel of Truth* is understood to be “that turning to oneself and to God, which is Gnosis, to the discovery and winning of ourselves at the same time as the knowledge of God and the return to Him in Whom our proper being has its beginning and end.”²³ In other words, *Gospel of Truth* teaches that introspection leads to the revelation of our true self that is at the same time the manifestation of God. This revelation is accomplished, according to the author of the text, through Christ. As such, Quispel presents Valentinus as an early Christian writer whose message dovetails with the psychologization of religion.

Quispel, Gnosis, and Christianity

Quispel’s interest in Valentinus was more than academic. He admitted admits that his

²⁰ See for instance Hoeller, *Gnosticism*; Stratford, *Living Gnosticism*; Smoley, *Forbidden Faith*.

²¹ Quispel, “The Jung Codex and Its Significance,” 12.

²² Ibid. “Vulgar gnosis” had been a term in use for some time to distinguish the Valentinian school from the “gnostics” of Iren 1.29-30 Valentinus is presumed to have received certain doctrines from. See for example “Valentinus” in *A Dictionary of Christian Biography, Literature, Sects, and Doctrines* Vol 4 (1880). Pp 1088-1089.

²³

interest in the gnostics arose from his own experiences. While working as a schoolmaster during the war, Quispel watched bombs fall from the sky and friends return from the frontlines in coffins. He was **beset by depression**. At the same time Quispel was at work on his dissertation on the Valentinians. He decided that “the heretics were right. . . there was a sort of crack in the universe.”²⁴ And with that admission everything changed. In his own words, “that was the inner experience: all of a sudden the unconscious mind started working and disclosing its mythological images and I was very excited and was in a very sensitive state for years. It took me my whole life to speak about Valentinus in a rational way so that other people could appreciate it.”²⁵

Beginning with his article on Basilides, “Gnostic Man: The Doctrine of Basilides,” and until the end of his life, Quispel would offer the same definition of gnosis: “Gnosis is an experience, inspired by vivid and profound emotions, in short Gnosis in *the mythic expression of Self experience*.”²⁶ He is quite open that his understanding of gnosis was informed by his own experiences. After reading Jung’s work, Quispel equated the Jungian psychological notion of individuation and *gnosis*. Both concepts suggested the unveiling of the unconscious through imagistic thinking and intense emotional experiences. Jungian archetypal psychology, particularly the notions of synchronicity, projection, the Self, and *mysterium coniunctus*, gave him a language for explicating texts like the *Gospel of Truth*.²⁷

In subsequent writings, Quispel offered conjectures that would further impact the religious reception of the NHC. Specifically, Quispel accepted the claim of Irenaeus (*Adversus Haeresis* 1.29) that Valentinus provided the bridge between *gnosis* as it existed within heretical Judaism amongst the *gnostikoi* and early Christianity. This is more than a historical claim from a careful scholar. It also suggests what is essential and inessential in *gnosis*. Quispel traces fundamental mythologems of Gnostic myth back to “heretical” or “heterodox” Jewish circles: the creation of Adam by the angels, the angel of the Lord in charge of creation, and the fall of Sophia. The *Gospel of Truth* indicates that *gnosis* as the “mythologization of self-experience”

²⁴ Farmer, “An Interview with Gilles Quispel,” in *Gnosis* issue 1, 27.

²⁵ Farmer, “An Interview with Gilles Quispel,” in *Gnosis* issue 1, 27.

²⁶ Quote from “Gnosis and Psychology,” 20, in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism: Volume 1*. Cf parallels in: “Gnostic Man: The Doctrine of Basilides,” 124, in *Gnostic Studies*; “The Original Doctrine of Valentinus,” 29, in *Gnostic Studies*; “From Mythos to Logos,” 159, in *Gnostic Studies*; “C.G. Jung und die Gnosis,” 298, in *Eranos-Jahrbuch*, 37 (1968); “Gnosis and Culture,” 143, in *Gnostica, Judaica, Catholica*;

²⁷ For Jung’s writings on these topics, see the following. Synchronicity: “On Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle.”; On the Self archetype, see Jung, *Aion*, 1-48; Idem, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, (). References to projection are strewn through Jung’s essays. See for example Jung, *Aion*, 1-41 ();

can occur without any such mythologems.²⁸ Gnosis need not lead to Gnosticism. Proceeding from this distinction, Quispel lent academic legitimacy to the notion of a tradition of *gnosis* in the west that was distinct from faith and reason, Christianity and science.

Quispel's counter-memory of Valentinus has had a considerable impact on Christianity in America. The claim Valentinus was a potential bishop, whatever its historical merits, provides a pivotal counter-memory in early Christianity. The formalism, dogmatism, impersonal and political dimensions of Christian tradition that self-described Gnostics disparage can be swept aside in the "might have been" of a church under Valentinus' leadership. Claiming Valentinus authored the *Gospel of Truth* (a claim now disputed by notable Valentinus scholars like Marchkies and Thomassen) helps to imagine a Christian *gnosis* that elides characteristic mythologems of Gnosticism: the Demiurge, aeons, and alien God.²⁹ In other words, Valentinus points the way to a form of Christian *gnosis* that disregards elements of Gnosticism that prove unpalatable to the modern mind.³⁰

On the other hand, as Quispel put it in his still untranslated *Gnosis als Weltreligionen*, "Gnosis minus Christentum ist Gnosis."³¹ Valentinus is the paradigmatic visionary who captured his experience of the (transcendent) self in poems, homilies, and myth. Religious experience and creativity are inseparable. *Gnosis* of the deepest self is at the same time an experience of identity with God that transcends any particular tradition. Quispel identifies a tradition of *gnosis* in western culture that appears not just in heretical Christianities (Cathars, etc.), but also in artists (William Blake), writers (Herman Hesse), and philosophers (German Idealism).³² The tradition of *gnosis* is separate from the traditions of faith and of reason.

From the time he wrote his dissertation until the end of his life, Quispel would claim that the survival of the Christian tradition hinged on a reincorporation of this *gnosis* into the Catholic church. *Gnosis* has been the shadow of Catholicism throughout its history. Without it the tradition will not be able to speak to a modern age: "As I see it, the only hope for the Christian religion is for the Roman Catholic Church to integrate Gnosis and personal religious experience. In this way it could be transformed from an authoritarian institution into a constitutional

²⁸ See Quispel's essay "Gnosticism," *Gnostica, Judaica, Catholica: The Collected Essays of Gilles Quispel*, 155-175. "Ezekiel 1.26 in Jewish Mysticism and Gnosis," 461-475

²⁹ Quispel, *Gnosis as Weltreligionen*, (); Idem,

³⁰ Quispel, "The Valentinian Gnosis and the Apocryphon of John."

³¹ Quispel, *Gnosis als Weltreligionen*, 51.

³² Quispel, "Gnosis and Culture."

monarchy.”³³ That is, the church never has been nor will be democratic, but with an infusion of Gnosis, it would be better adapted to an experiential, psychological, and individualistic age than its current authoritarian model.

Stephan Hoeller

No individual has had a greater impact on the construction of contemporary religious neo-Gnosticism than Stephan Hoeller (B: 19831). Hoeller has been the leading spokesman for Ecclesial Gnosticism, defined as self-described Gnostic churches that claim apostolic succession through the Roman Catholic Church.³⁴ While serving as Bishop of the *Ecclesia Gnostica* in Los Angeles, he has written five books, contributed scores of articles to magazines, and delivered hundreds of public lectures that have been circulated as tapes and podcasts.³⁵ Gnosis.org, the website which pioneered the posting of NHC texts online in 1995, is affiliated with his Gnostic Society. Today, approaching 86 years of age, Hoeller continues to deliver weekly lectures under the auspices of the Gnostic Society and is a regular on the podcast Aeon Byte.³⁶

To understand Hoeller’s influence on the reception of the Nag Hammadi Library, it is necessary to detail his dual model of Gnostic tradition. The first traces *gnosis* within western Christianity from Simon Magus to the Christian Gnostics (Valentinus, Basilides, Carpocrates, those responsible for the NHC, etc.), forward through the Bogomils and Cathars, the Knights Templar, and into the present through Jacob Boehme, the Rosicrucians, Blake, *L’Eglise Gnostique*, G.R.S. Mead and, ultimately, Hoeller’s own *Ecclesia Gnostica*.³⁷ Of this lineage Hoeller states: “Gnosticism is truly a tradition and not a mere collection of ideas, myths, and symbols that may be interpreted according to any whim or opinion. What we have here is a full-blown tradition with its definite worldview, its scriptures, its mystery rites, its priesthoods, and its spiritual lineage.”³⁸ This line of tradition forms an alternative chain *within* Christianity.³⁹ The

³³ Quispel, “Gnosis and the Future of Christian Religion,” 832.

³⁴ The term is my own. It is preferable to Neo-Gnosticism insofar as it identifies a recognizable modern current. See Dillon, “The Impact of Scholarship on Contemporary Gnosticism(s).”

³⁵ Books: Hoeller, *The Royal Road*; Idem, *The Gnostic Jung*; Idem, *Jung and the Lost Gospels*; Idem, *Freedom*; Idem, *Gnosticism: New Light on an Ancient Tradition of Inner Knowing*. A full list of his articles and lectures would run dozens of pages long. For links to a selection of articles, see: <http://www.gnosis.org/library/valentinus/index.html>. And for the most up-to-date links to his lectures, see: <http://www.gnosis.org/lectures.html>.

³⁶ Aeon Byte episodes with Stephan Hoeller: “An Interview with Stephan Hoeller: The Life of a Modern Gnostic”; “CG Jung and The Red Book”; “The Gnosis of CG Jung”.

³⁷ The most lucid articulation of this lineage is to be found in Hoeller, *Gnosticism*, 93-174.

³⁸ Ibid, xi.

NHC represents the return of some of earliest scriptures of this Gnostic Christianity and can be used to revive ancient rituals and beliefs from it.

Alongside the tradition of Gnostic Christianity is what Hoeller refers to as “Pansophy” or the “western mysteries” tradition.⁴⁰ Pansophy identifies an *aire de famille* within western practices and ideas that Hoeller sees as expressive of *gnosis*: from Neoplatonism, Kabbalah, and alchemy, through the Hermetic Renaissance magi, on to Romantic poets, Nietzsche, Herman Hesse, the ceremonial magic of the Golden Dawn, Carl Jung, and many others.⁴¹ This more amorphous tradition serves hermeneutic, discursive, and synchronous identity purposes. By identifying chronologically later individuals *ex post facto* as part of the Gnostic tradition, Hoeller validates using their writings as hermeneutic lenses for understanding the ancient Gnostic texts. In practice, he utilizes Jungian and Theosophical concepts to understand the NHC and the ancient Gnostics who authored them.

Discursively, the Pansophic tradition distinguishes a western form of mystical, interior, and psychologically sophisticated form of spirituality as a viable alternative to Eastern traditions: “Many people in recent decades. . . have turned to Eastern religions in search of teachings and practices with less dogma and more inspiration. They have probably had no inkling that just such an alternative exists closer to home.”⁴² Third, tradition “affirms a bond between participants that is both synchronic and diachronic.”⁴³ The Pansophic tradition invoked by Hoeller includes no living members. Instead, the tradition rhetorically marks an identity between the ancient Gnostics and individuals within the cultic milieu whose religious interests are touch on this Pansophic tradition. Whether a Kabbalist, Sufi, alchemist, magician or Romantic poet, all are Gnostics for Hoeller.

Hoeller and the Gnostic Church

Hoeller’s biography indicates how these two Gnostic traditions intersect in his own life. When he was 10 the Nazis occupied his homeland of Hungary.⁴⁴ Three years later, in 1946, the

³⁹ As will be seen, Hoeller is legitimizing his own Gnostic community through this alternative tradition. His discourse creates a normative Christian model from which the Gnostics were deviant and actively suppressed.

⁴⁰ Hoeller, *Jung and the Lost Gospels*, 26-28.

⁴¹ See Hoeller, *Gnostic Jung*, 24-30.

⁴² Hoeller, *Gnosticism*, 3.

⁴³ Grieve and Weiss, “Illuminating the Half-Life of Tradition,” 5.

⁴⁴ My account of Hoeller’s biography is assembled from a variety of sources: Hoeller, *The Gnostic Jung*, “Prologue”; Idem, *Freedom*, “Preface”; “An Interview with Stephan Hoeller” in *The Gnostic IV*; “Stephan Hoeller: Life as a Modern Gnostic” on Aeon Byte Gnostic Radio; “The Rebirth of Gnosticism: An Interview with Dr.

Soviet Union forcibly took control of the Hungarian government. Dissent was lethal. Soldiers of the Red Army assassinated his uncle. His father escaped the same fate only by surviving their three gunshots. During secondary school Hoeller was a seminarian in the Cistercian Order with intentions of going into the priesthood. After reaching adulthood Hoeller chose instead a life of exile. First, in Belgium, Hoeller befriended representatives of the French Gnostic Church. Though he did not join the church at this time, they introduced him to ancient Gnostic literature. Next, while working towards his doctorate at the University of Innsbruck in Austria, Hoeller came in contact with Jung's (then unpublished) *Septem Sermones*. At the same time, he joined the Theosophical Society, which he remains a member of to this day.

In the early 1950's he relocated to Los Angeles. It was here that he would come into contact with Richard de Palatine and, under his supervision, be ~~ordained~~ as a Gnostic Bishop and found the *Ecclesia Gnostica*. Hoeller also revived the Gnostic Society, a branch of the Theosophical Society founded in 1928, where he gives his public lectures. Within the *Ecclesia Gnostica* Hoeller professes and practices the tradition of Gnostic Christianity. In his lectures and writing for the public, topics of Hoeller's lectures span the whole of the Pansophic Tradition.

Hoeller first came across the Nag Hammadi Library in the Peuch, Malinine, and Quispel's translation of *The Gospel of Thomas*.⁴⁵ Soon thereafter he would develop relationships with James Robinson and Marvin Meyer at Claremont, and often visited the Institute while scholars were translating texts in the 1970's.⁴⁶ To Hoeller, the rediscovery of the NHL is the religious equivalent of the atom bombs dropped at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.⁴⁷ It changes the trajectory of the Christian tradition. The library marks the revival of forms of *gnosis* that thrived in early Christianity before being cast out as heresy.⁴⁸ Valentinus, "the Gnostic who almost became Pope," serves as the primary symbol of memory in this regard.⁴⁹ It was only "the increasing flood tide of a *regressive pseudo-orthodoxy* [which] caused his efforts to fail (italics mine)."⁵⁰ The entire history of the church would have been entirely different had he won: "[Valentinus'] hermeneutic vision combined with his superb sense of the mythical would have

Stephan A. Hoeller" in New Dawn Magazine. See <http://www.newdawnmagazine.com/articles/the-rebirth-of-gnosticism-an-interview-with-dr-stephan-a-hoeller>.

⁴⁵ "Stephan Hoeller: Life as a Modern Gnostic."

⁴⁶ John Turner, personal communication, Jan 13, 2016.

⁴⁷ Hoeller, *Jung and the Lost Gospels*, "From Hiroshima to the Secret Gospels," 233.

⁴⁸ Idem, *Gnosticism*, 203. He uses the term "heresy" deliberately. See, for example, "A Tale of Two Heresies" in *Jung and the Lost Gospels*.

⁴⁹ Hoeller, "Valentinus: A Gnostic for All Seasons," in *Gnosis* 1.1, 1985, 23. Hoeller is familiar with the writings of Tertulian on this point, but the more immediate influence here is certainly Quispel. On his relationship to Quispel, see: *Jung and the Lost Gospels*, 100; "An Interview with Stephan A. Hoeller"; and "The Rebirth of Gnosticism."

⁵⁰ Tertulian, *Val* 4.1-2. Hoeller, *Gnosticism*, 114.

probably resulted in a general flowering of the Gnosis within the very fabric of the Church of Rome, and might have created an authoritative paradigm of Gnostic Christianity that could not have been easily exorcised for centuries, if at all.”⁵¹

Presenting Valentinus as the “almost Pope” provides a counter-memory that legitimizes Hoeller’s contemporary Gnostic revival. Hoeller’s church claims to be a successor of *L’Eglise Gnostique* (The Gnostic Church) as constituted by Jules Doinel. *L’Eglise Gnostique* is formally Valentinian. Doinel asserts the primary work of the church is to save Sophia Achamoth, unite her to Christ, and catalyze the return of the spiritual ones to the Pleroma at the end of time.⁵² In his introductory homily to *L’Eglise Gnostique*, Doinel preached the cosmology of Ptolemy as presented in *Adversus Haeresis*.⁵³ Doinel even adopted Valentinus as his namesake (Tau Valentin I). The French Gnostics conceived the *gnosis* of Valentinus as an esoteric current within the Catholic Church that they revived in 1889. Hoeller’s own *Ecclesia Gnostica* adapted much from the French revival, including much of their “Gnostic Catechism,” the claim of apostolic succession, a liturgical and focus on the figure of Sophia, and the emphasis on observing the sacraments. The claim Valentinus nearly became Pope serves as a safeguard against labeling the Gnostic revival heresy. Instead, these churches embody for Hoeller what Christianity might have been had a few votes swung the other way.

Hoeller and the Nag Hammadi Library

Reading the NHL has led Hoeller to go beyond his French Gnostic roots in three ways. The first is to homologize ancient Gnosticism and Jungian psychology. Hoeller sees *The Gospel of Truth* as confirmation that Valentinus mythologized his own self-experience into sermons, poems, and narratives.⁵⁴ Jung’s theory can be used to interpret Gnostic writings as narratives of psychological individuation because the Gnostics experienced individuation and encoded it in mythology. The section of *The Gospel of Truth* that presents the plight of the individual prior to the reception of knowledge is paramount (NHC I,3 28.32-30.16). This nightmarish view of life – where the ignorant one flees to one knows not where, imagines being killed or murdering another, falling from a great height, etc. – depicts for Hoeller the resistance of the ego to the

⁵¹ Hoeller, “Valentinus,” 23.

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⁵³ On Ptolemy’s teaching of the constitution of the aeonic realms, see Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, 1.8.5 (Rousseau/Doutreleau, 128–37).

⁵⁴ Hoeller, *Jung and the Lost Gospels*, 222-23.

intrapsychic process of awakening. Drives, emotions, and symbols of the unconscious not yet assimilated provoke terror in the weak ego.

Valentinus' Christology further confirms that his experiences concur with Jungian psychology. The revelation of the Son in *The Gospel of Truth* (30,23-31,35) corresponds to Christ the symbol of the Self that erupts into awareness. He serves as the guide for the ego to recognize its own transcendent dimension, integrate its alien contents into awareness, and achieve the wholeness of the self.⁵⁵

Further mythemes from the Nag Hammadi codices NHC are framed in such Jungian terms. The myth of Sophia – read as the soul-ego losing touch with the pleroma/unconscious, falling into the world of differentiation, becoming distressed, and ultimately reintegrating into the Pleroma with the help of Christ – is read as a second model of individuation. It too is attributed to Valentinus.⁵⁶ Finally, Valentinus' depiction of the Aeons emanating out from the undifferentiated potential of the Depth into syzygies is read by Hoeller as a proto-psychological recognition of the Jungian doctrines *coincidentia oppositorum* and *mysterium coniunctus*, while his Pleroma is a direct symbol of the collective unconscious.⁵⁷ In short, the ancient Gnostics – Valentinian, Sethian, or other – were the first Christian intellectuals to interpret the scriptures symbolically. So doing, they appear to have discovered Jungian concepts.

The second way in which the NHC leads Hoeller to innovate the French Gnostic stream relates to the sacraments. *L'Eglise Gnostique* practiced five sacraments: water baptism, baptism of fire and wind (*consolamentum*), the order, the Eucharist, and extreme unction.⁵⁸ Hoeller instead follows the list set forth in *The Gospel of Phillip*: “The Lord did everything in a mystery, a baptism and a chrism and a eucharist and a redemption and a bridal chamber” (NHC II,3 67.27-30). These are the five mentioned by Hoeller in his “Gnostic Catechism” for the *Ecclesia*

⁵⁵ Hoeller's presentation of Christ are practically uniform across contexts. See Hoeller, “The Myth of the Gnostic Christ,” 117-135 in *Jung and the Lost Gospels*; Idem, “The Gnostic Christ: Savior or Liberator?,” 55-70 in *Gnosticism*; See also his lectures “Christ: The Misunderstood Redeemer” (<http://www.gnosis.org/audio/Christ-Misunderstood-Redeemer.mp3>) and “The Greatest Treasures of the Nag Hammadi: Gospels of the Gnostic Christ: Thomas and Phillip” (<http://bcrecordings.net/freenonmem/100100.mp3>).

⁵⁶ Hoeller, *Gnosticism*, 115: “Though the figure of the Divine Feminine was undoubtedly present in Gnosticism since its inception, as evidenced in the teachings of the earliest known Gnostic, Simon Magus, the myth of Sophia in particular, with all of its rich detail and dramatic elaborations, is largely the work of Valentinus.”

⁵⁷ Hoeller, *Jung and the Lost Gospels*, 68-69. In particular, Hoeller seems to follow Quispel “Original Doctrine of Valentinus” in attributing Irenaeus *Haer.* I.11.1 to Valentinus. The psychological significance here is that *Haer.* I.11.1 suggests *all* emanations originally reside in Depth, while other presentations of the Valentinian pleromatology keep the Father entirely separate from all later emanations. For a critique of the position Valentinus is behind the doctrine presented in *Haer.* I.11.1, see Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed*, 24-27.

⁵⁸ Bricaud, “The Esoteric Christian Doctrine: The Sacraments (unnumbered)”.

Gnostica.⁵⁹ In his view, these five were initially practiced within the Catholic Church, but the redemption and bridal chamber were subsequently rendered into the mundane sacraments of penance and matrimony.⁶⁰ As he sees it, the normative church simply could not support the psychological transformation and visionary revelations catalyzed by these two rites in their original forms.

Insofar as it is unclear from *The Gospel of Phillip* and other Valentinian texts what the redemption and bridal chamber entailed in their original context, it is worthwhile to distinguish Hoeller's reconstructions from those of scholars. Einar Thomassen has concluded that the *apolytrosis* is simply the name given by Valentinians to the Christian initiation ritual, of which water baptism is the primary component.⁶¹ As per the bridal chamber, scholars have delivered four general opinions: 1) an ascetic-symbolic bridal chamber; 2) the bridal chamber refers to marital sex; 3) there is no consistent bridal chamber; 4) couples in intercourse focus their will and vision on God above so that the spiritual seed descends and the conceived child is imprinted by the image of the Lord.⁶² Furthermore, while opinions vary, a general consensus has been building towards interpreting the bridal chamber as an eschatological extension of the ritual initiation in Valentinian circles, not a separate sacrament.

Hoeller's reconstruction departs from these academic alternatives. He reframes the redemption and bridal chamber as spiritual technologies meant to catalyze psychological transformation. The *apolytrosis* is an act of renunciation. The "Gnostic initiate becomes free of

⁵⁹ Hoeller, "Gnostic Catechism," IX, 156 and 157.

⁶⁰ Hoeller, *Jung and the Lost Gospels*, 204.

⁶¹ Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed*, 360-364.

⁶² In this taxonomy I follow the reconstruction of DeConick, DeConick, "The Great Mystery of Marriage. Sex and Conception in Ancient Valentinian Traditions, 307-310. For the ascetic bridal chamber, see: H.-M. Schenke, "Das Evangelium nach Philippus." Ein Evangelium der Valentinianer aus dem Funde von Nag Hammadi," TLZ 84 (1959), p. 5; E. Segelberg, "The Coptic-Gnostic Gospel according to Philip and its Sacramental System," Numen 7 (1960); Y. Janssens, "L'Evangile selon Philippe," Museon 81 (1981); "The 'Sacramental System' of the Gospel of Philip," Studia Paristia 17 (1982), pp. 251-260. For the sexual bridal chamber, see: R.M. Grant, "The Mystery of Marriage in the Gospel of Philip," pp. 136-138 (129-140).; J.E. Menard, L'vngile selon Phlippe (Theologica Montis Regii 35; Montreal: de Montreal, 1964), p. 50; G. Quispel, "The Birth of the Child. Some Gnostic and Jewish Aspects," Eranos 40 (1971), pp. 285-309; idem, "Genius and Spirit" in (ed.) M. Krause, Essays on the Nag Hammadi Texts in Honour of Pahor Labib (NHS 4; Leiden: EJ. Brill, 1975), pp. 164-167. (155-169); idem, "The Study of Encratism: A Historical Survey," in (ed.) U. Bianchi, La Tradizione dell'Enkrateia, Atti del Colloquio Internazionale-Milano 20-23 Aprile 1982 (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1985), pp. 74-75 (35-81). For the inconsistent presentation of the bridal chamber, see: E.H. Pagels, "The 'Mystery of Marriage' in the Gospel of Philip Revisited," in B. Pearson (ed.), The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 444 (442-454). For DeConick, see: DeConick, The Great Mystery of Marriage. Sex and Conception in Ancient Valentinian Traditions, 307-342.

the compelling attachments to this world and its rulers.”⁶³ The initiate is then sealed with the oil of the balsam tree. Hoeller defines the effects of the rite as follows:

The intention of the sacrament of the Redemption is to deliver a person from the shackles of the Demiurge and the Archons. The effects traditionally held are: (1) It remits all of one's faults and gives one the strength not to commit grave offenses; (2) It perfects in one the change produced by the Baptism of Water; (3) It makes one the temple of the Holy Spirit; (4) By its effects we become complete Christians (PERFECTI); (5) It renews the link between one's soul and the Twin Angel or Deific Double from whom one has been separated at one's descent into the Archonic realm; (6) Finally, it assures one of one's liberation from the cycle of birth and death and thus frees one of the necessity of future embodiments on earth.⁶⁴

As to what the *apolytrosis* ritual entails, Hoeller remains silent.

The Bridal Chamber completes the process of uniting one's soul with its “twin angel” or “deific double.”⁶⁵ Its effects are twofold. First, the bridal chamber protects the aspirant from the possibility of rebirth after death.⁶⁶ Second, the final sacrament is understood as the completion of the psychological process of individuation. The wedding of the bride and bridegroom symbolically represents the androgynization of the psychic self.⁶⁷ About how to catalyze this in sacrament, Hoeller also remains silent: “At this time in history, the sacrament of the Bride-Chamber is not conferred in earthly form, but is received by the soul in its own realm, usually after bodily death. It is not impossible, however, that the Bride-Chamber may return in earthly manifestation when God so decrees.”⁶⁸

The *Gospel of Phillip* allows Hoeller to restore what he sees as the *original* sacraments to the Christian tradition. The practice creates a diachronic identity between contemporary Gnostic Christians and the ancient Valentinians.⁶⁹ It also seeks to authorize the Gnostic church as superior to the Catholic insofar as the former now practices the original sacraments prior to

⁶³ Ibid, 206.

⁶⁴ Hoeller, “Gnostic Catechism,” Lesson X, 191.

⁶⁵ Hoeller, “Gnostic Catechism,” Lesson X, 194.

⁶⁶ Hoeller, *Jung and the Lost Gospels*, 208. He is referencing *The Gospel of Philip* (NHC II, 3) 70.5-9, “The powers do not see those who are clothed in the perfect light, and consequently are not able to detain them. One will clothe himself in this light sacramentally in the union.”

⁶⁷ Ibid 208. “the psychic androgynization envisioned by psychology as the result of the process of individuation has apparently been anticipated (and sometimes achieved) by the protopsychologists called Gnostics.”

⁶⁸ Hoeller, “Gnostic Catechism,” Lesson X, 197.

⁶⁹ On ritual as a means of legitimizing diachronous identity within a tradition, see Grieve and Weiss, “Illuminating the Half-Life of Tradition,” 4-5.

routinization. Yet this shift also has implications for the Pansophic tradition. The notion that sacraments are spiritual technologies to catalyze *gnosis* and produce individuation legitimizes the practice of rituals from throughout the Gnostic tradition – not just the ancient world. Hoeller himself practices ceremonial magic from the Golden Dawn, has written on techniques of astral travel, and wrote his first book on visual meditation using the Tarot and Kabbalistic Tree of Life.⁷⁰ Much as this second tradition is identified by the experience of *gnosis*, a gnostic ritual is identified as those in the west that have served to catalyze altered states and the transformation of the psychic self.

Finally, the diverse contents Nag Hammadi Library are seen by Hoeller to provide a confirmation of his dual-model of tradition. As he understands it, these books were the possession of Pachomian monks who buried them during “a wave of religious persecution.”⁷¹ Both the contents and owners of the books therefore point to an early, esoteric form of Christianity. The NHC represents “a library of diverse reading materials of Gnostic interest” that showcases how Gnostics of all times have been eclectic and inclusive.⁷² For Hoeller, *Gnosis* is everywhere identical insofar as it is the experience of the (divine) self. Only the culture, time, and psychological disposition of the individual lead to variations.⁷³ True gnostics recognize *gnosis* behind variations, including the compilers of the Nag Hammadi Library. The inclusion of *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* in codex six legitimizes the connection between Hermetism and Gnostic Christianity, while the Platonic-visionary speculations of *Zostrianos* sit near the relatively orthodox *Teachings of Silvanus*. The Nag Hammadi Library is therefore used to invoke authority for both strands of Gnostic tradition: the esoteric Christian and the more amorphous.

Taken altogether, it is clear why Hoeller’s reconstruction of the Gnostics through the NHC has been so influential. His counter-memory emphasizes that a Gnostic form of Christianity was a viable, co-equal alternative in the earliest tradition. Its repression and forgetting have led to a normative tradition that is dogmatic, diluted, and rationalized. The rediscovery of the NHC allows for a massive reawakening of a Gnostic-Christian alternative that Hoeller frames as creative, mystical, metaphorical-symbolic, and individualistic. Equating the

⁷⁰ See Hoeller, *The Royal Road: A Manual of Kabbalistic Meditations on the Tarot*. For his writings on astral travel, see *ibid*, 115-119. On Magic, see his lecture “Magic: A Road to Self” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hkhjYZACrQ>).

⁷¹ Hoeller, *Gnosticism*, 198.

⁷² *Ibid*, 199.

⁷³ Hoeller, *Gnosticism*, 9-10.

Jungian and ancient Gnostic hermeneutic procedures suggests that the religious needs of modern, psychological man – personally meaningful relationship to symbols, reinterpretation, and a more vital sense of attachment – were identical to those experienced by “Gnostics” in the ancient world. Hoeller’s subtle keying of these Gnostics to the interests of those in the cultic milieu invites an identification between the religiously marginal or deviant of today and the past, especially those who still have an affective attachment to Christian symbols.

The Gnostic Gospel of Elaine Pagels

Elaine Pagels (B: 1943), Professor of Religion at Princeton University, has introduced generations of readers to the Nag Hammadi Library. Her best-known work *The Gnostic Gospels* continues to sell after over 30 printings in English.⁷⁴ The immense popularity of *The Gnostic Gospels* thrust Pagels into the public spotlight. She has appeared on nearly every major documentary dealing with rediscovered Coptic texts (e.g., BBC’s *The Gnostics; The Gospel of Judas; Finding Jesus*). *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (2003), which is both an exploration of the history of faith in early Christianity and Pagels’ own religious biography, became a New York Times best-seller. She has played a role in the major editions of the Nag Hammadi texts, writing introductions for individual texts in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* and the general introduction to *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures* (2007). In America, Pagels’ work and the Nag Hammadi codices NHL are practically synonymous.

This section examines Pagels’ own reception of the Nag Hammadi Library. There are two dimensions to assess: 1) Pagels’ own personal approach to the NHC; 2) the way her scholarship has come to impact cultural memory concerning “the Gnostics.” Pagels’ life and work offer clear evidence for the ways in which symbolic loss of the Christian tradition and revisions of cultural memory are intertwined. Pagels researches and writes about the topics that concern her own spiritual life.⁷⁵ She is *seeking*. When she was confronted by personal tragedy (not once, but twice), Pagels would return to the Christian tradition for solace. The tradition that she returned to, however, was one she had revised through her scholarship.

⁷⁴ As of Nov 30th, 2016, *The Gnostic Gospels* remains the #2 best-selling book on ‘Gnosticism’ listed on Amazon.

⁷⁵ “One’s own spirituality is always hard to define...I came to an understanding that there is a spiritual dimension to life, and it is something that I deal with in my life. Some people can avoid dealing with it, but sometimes people’s lives just come up against it, and they can’t excuse it as unresolved political or sexual or other kinds of issues. There’s another dimension one needs to consider. My work informs the way I think about that, but it’s not a direct correlation.” Interview in <http://www.beatrice.com/interviews/pagels/>

Pagels: Early Career

Pagels was born in Palo Alto, CA. Raised nominally Protestant, she joined an Evangelical church after hearing Billy Graham preach in San Francisco at the age of 14.⁷⁶ When a friend of hers died in a car accident, she sought comfort in the church. The minister and her friends declared that since he had not been “born again” her friend was eternally damned. Pagels left the church.

As an undergraduate at Stanford she was loosely affiliated with the counterculture. Jerry Garcia, later of Grateful Dead fame, was her roommate in 1961.⁷⁷ Still, her attachment to the Christian tradition remained. She studied Greek at Stanford and pursued “the real Christianity” in graduate school.⁷⁸ Her mentor at Harvard, Helmut Koester, was at that time writing the essays that would become *Trajectories in Early Christianity*. There she was introduced to the work of Walter Bauer, *The Gospel of Thomas*, and Coptic philology alongside her training in the New Testament. Her dissertation focused on exegesis of the Gospel of John in Heracleon and Origen.⁷⁹ From the beginning, then, Pagels’ scholarly focus was on the interplay between “heresy” (esp. the Valentinians) and “orthodoxy.”

In 1977, Random House published *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (NHLE). Pagels contributed introductions to four texts, all Valentinian: *The Tripartite Tractate*; *The Dialogue of the Savior*; *The Interpretation of Knowledge*; *A Valentinian Exposition*. Other scholars (e.g., John Turner, Birger Pearson, and Douglas Parrott) introduced and translated more NHC texts, and all from distinctive traditions. Pagels has never published a Coptic translation. She also limits her discussion of technical vocabulary to Greek loan words.⁸⁰ As such, it must be noted that a scholar of Early Christianity, who works primarily in Greek, introduced most of

⁷⁶ Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 14 and 31. My account of Pagels’ biography has been assembled from her writings and interviews. See especially: Pagels, “Introduction,” *The Gnostic Gospels*; Pagels, “From the Feast of Agape to the Nicene Creed,” in *Beyond Belief*; “Great Conversations: Elaine Pagels and Gustav Niebuhr,” <http://worldchannel.org/programs/episode/great-conversations-elaine-pagels-gustav-niebuhr/>; “Now: Bill Moyers Interviews Elaine Pagels,” http://www.pbs.org/now/transcript/transcript_pagels.html; “The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John. . . and Thomas?,” <http://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/2003/06/matthew-mark-luke-and-thomas?p=3>.

⁷⁷ Jackson, *Garcia: An American Life*, 41.

⁷⁸ Ibid 31.

⁷⁹ Pagels, “The Hermeneutical Debate between Origen and Heracleon in Origen’s Commentary on John,” Harvard PhD Dissertation, 1970. The dissertation would be published as Pagels, *The Johannine Gospels in Gnostic Exegesis*.

⁸⁰ To cite a couple examples: in the “Acknowledgements” to *The Gnostic Gospels*, Pagels informs readers that she has modified the NHLE translations of τελειώσις (“perfection” to “fulfillment”) and ἄνθρωπος (from “man” to “humanity”). Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, ix. Similarly, Pagels stresses the importance of γνώσις but makes no mention of its Coptic equivalent (cooyñ and variants).

America to the NHC – *not* a Coptacist, scholar of Gnosticism, or member of the team at Claremont.⁸¹

The Gnostic Gospels

In 1979, Random House published *The Gnostic Gospels* as a crossover book to illuminate the *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*.⁸² Raymond E. Brown and Harold Bloom reviewed the book for newspapers of record (the New York Times and Washington Post, respectively).⁸² Soon after its publication, Pagels offered published four chapters from the book as features in the New York Times Review of Books.⁸³ It would go on to win a National Book Award, a National Book Critics Circle Award, and be enshrined as one of HarperCollins' "100 Best Spiritual Books of the Twentieth Century." Largely on the merits of *The Gnostic Gospels*, Pagels would receive a MacArthur Award in 1981. Few academic books have been as celebrated, or as influential.

At the core of *The Gnostic Gospels* is an antagonism between the "heresiologists" and "Gnostics." Pagels uses 'heresy' and 'gnostic' interchangeably, following a convention borne of the alternative Greek and Latin titles of Irenaeus' famous work: Ἐλεγχος καὶ ἀνατροπὴ τῆς ψευδωνύμου γνώσεως (Greek: The Refutation and Overthrow of Falsely-called Knowledge) and *Adversus haereses* (Latin: Against Heresies). The orthodox are the foil to the Gnostics. While Pagels notes there is diversity both in orthodoxy and heterodoxy, the structural antagonism of the book makes it rich find for readers looking to build counter-memories vis-à-vis the traditional church.

Central tenets of church doctrine and memory are portrayed as *political* decisions necessary to consolidate the church. In the chapter "The Passion of Christ," for example, Pagels considers the relationship between the passion narrative and martyrdom. As she presents it, opponents of heresy – "Ignatius, Polycarp, Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus – are

⁸¹ Pagels acknowledges as much in her introduction: "because my research falls into this category (Gnosticism and early Christianity), I have selected primarily the Gnostic Christian sources for the basis of this book. . . .I intend here to show how gnostic forms of Christianity interact with orthodoxy – and what this tells us about the origins of Christianity itself." Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, xxxiv.

⁸² Brown, "The Christians Who Lost Out," Jan 20, 1980, New York Times; Bloom, "The Gnostic Christ," Nov 25, 1979, Washington Post.

⁸³ Pagels, "The Discovery of the Gnostic Gospels" (10/25/1979); Idem., "The Threat of the Gnostics" (11/8/1979); Idem, "The Suppressed Gnostic Feminism" (11/22/1979); Idem, "The Defeat of the Gnostics," (12/6/1979).

unanimous both in proclaiming Christ's passion and death and in affirming martyrdom."⁸⁴ Why? Persecution gave an impetus to the formation an organized church structure. Regional differences were obstacles to consolidation. Martyrdom gave a visceral and immediate issue to bind a singular Christian identity.⁸⁵ Similar social explanations underlie church doctrines such as the literal passion and resurrection, apostolic authority, and all-male clergy.⁸⁶

Pagels characterizes early orthodox leaders with vivid language that invites analogies to dictatorial governments. Irenaeus of Lyons "realized he must forge theological weapons" in order to "demolish" the "heretical teachings."⁸⁷ Like McCarthy outing secret Communists, Irenaeus desires to "expose those who act like orthodox Christians, but who were privately members of gnostic circles."⁸⁸ Clement of Rome writes to his "unruly church in Corinth that women are to 'remain in the rule of subjection' to their husbands."⁸⁹ Clement is even cast by Pagels as a demagogue. He "warns that whoever disobeys divinely ordained authorities 'receives the death penalty!'"⁹⁰ Writing this book in the immediate wake of the Viet Nam war, Watergate, and in the midst of the Cold War, it is clear to which side of these culture wars Pagels equates the nascent church to.

Pagels' presents the Gnostics as Romantic, rebellious mystics in conflict with their orthodox antagonists. These Gnostics are keyed to ideals and interests of the progressive American left. Unlike the patriarchy embodied in "God the Father," an all-male priesthood, and a neutered spirit, NHC texts such as the *Trimorphic Protennoia* and *Thunder: Perfect Mind* are read to celebrate feminine divine powers.⁹¹ Feminine concepts of the deity directly impact church organization and practice. Pagels cites the Valentinian churches, where women would prophesy and serve as priests, as proof.⁹² *The Gospel of Mary* shows feminine leadership in the early church was in vocal disagreement with the proto-orthodox, as represented by Peter.⁹³

⁸⁴ Ibid, 89.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 98-99.

⁸⁶ On literal death and resurrection of Jesus, see chapter "The Controversy over Christ's Resurrection: Historical Event or Symbol?"; On male clergy, chapter "God the Father/God the Mother"; On apostolic authority, chapter "One God, One Bishop: The Politics of Monotheism."

⁸⁷ Ibid, 44.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 45.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 63.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 34. The quote is from *1 Clement*, 41.3.

⁹¹ τὸ πνεῦμα, spirit in Greek, is neuter-gendered.

⁹² Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 59. The reference to Markus is from *Adversus Haersaes* 1.13.5.

⁹³ Ibid, 64-65. The topic of Mary will be explored in depth in Chapter 3.

Pagels even entitled one of her features for the New York Review of Books “The Suppressed Gnostic Feminism.”⁹⁴

The chief concern of the heresiologists was, in Pagels’ view, to combat the appeal of *gnosis*.⁹⁵ If these so-called gnostics could attain salvation in practices, experiences, or study, they would have no need for the church. In short, *gnosis* and the institutional church are framed as antithetical. So what is *gnosis* for Pagels, exactly? Her definition of *gnosis* as “insight. . . .an intuitive process of knowing oneself” is often repeated in popular literature.⁹⁶ Like Quispel, Pagels regards self-knowledge and knowledge of God as identical in the NHC texts. Its pursuit entails a solitary, difficult process of overcoming internal resistances: instincts, appetites, and encultured beliefs.

Gnosis as presented by Pagels is tailor-made for the American spiritual marketplace that is at once psychologically informed and determining beliefs through experience. Gnosis is fundamentally psychology-as-religion: “for the Gnostics, exploring the *psyche* became explicitly what it is for many people today implicitly – a religious quest.”⁹⁷ The gnostic recognizes that until they achieve self-knowledge (“insight”) they are driven by desires and fears that they do not understand. The Gnostic Jesus functions like a psychoanalyst who encourages his disciples to use “the mind as a guide, but reason is the teacher. . . .enlighten your mind. . .light the lamp within you.”⁹⁸ The culmination of *gnosis* is the realization of identity with the divine. In texts such as *The Gospel of Thomas*, The Kingdom of Heaven is not a specific place, but a state of being: “the kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will realize you are sons of the living father.”⁹⁹

Ultimately, Pagels concludes the psychological, mystical, and feminist forms of Christianity practiced by Gnostics were too “subjective” to support the institutional cohesion of

⁹⁴ Pagels, “God the Father/God the Mother,” chapter 3 in *The Gnostic Gospels*. Ibid, “The Suppressed Gnostic Feminism.”

⁹⁵ Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 121: “I suggest that the trouble with Gnosticism, from the orthodox viewpoint, was not only that gnostics often disagreed with the majority on such specific issues as those we have explored so far – the organization of authority, the participation of women, martyrdom: the orthodox recognized that those they called “gnostics” shared a fundamental religious perspective that remained antithetical to the claims of the institutional church.”

⁹⁶ Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, xix. Her definition is quoted in books from religious Gnostics such as: Jordan Stratford, *Living Gnosticism*, 10; Stephan Hoeller, *Gnosticism*, (); Richard Smoley, *Forbidden Faith*, ().

⁹⁷ Ibid, 123.

⁹⁸ Quoted in Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 127. It must be noted that “reason” here is a translation of *logos*. The guide of the mind (*nous*) therefore seems more intelligibly translated as Christ/Word.

⁹⁹ Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 128. Quoting *The Gospel of Thomas* logion 3.

the church, much less its survival.¹⁰⁰ *Gnosis* is antagonistic to institutionalization: “those who expected to “become Christ” themselves were not likely to recognize the institutional structures of the church – its bishop, priest, creed, canon, or ritual – as bearing ultimate authority.”¹⁰¹ As Pagels concludes her book, this “does not mean, as the casual reader might assume, that I advocate going back to Gnosticism – much less that I “side with it” against Christianity.” Without the creeds and institutional organization, the church would have died out like numerous other ancient mystery cults. We owe its survival to the institution Irenaeus and others built.

Such a protest tucked into a book’s conclusion cannot override the previous 150 pages of evidence to the contrary. This point was not lost on reviewers of her book. As Roman Catholic priest and New Testament scholar Raymond Brown put it: “About nine-tenths of the discussion of each topic in the book consists of her sympathetic effort to understand the gnostics’ side, which will leave the reader cheering for them and wishing the narrow-minded orthodox had not won.”¹⁰² Others labeled Pagels a “Gnostic Evangelist.”¹⁰³ Nevertheless, it is safe to say that, after two major book awards, more than thirty printings, and continued high sales after thirty-five years, such reviews did little to stall the influence of Pagels’ revision of Christian memory.

Beyond Belief

Not long after the publication of *The Gnostic Gospels*, Pagels was visited twice by excruciating tragedy.¹⁰⁴ In 1983 Pagels’ son, Mark, was diagnosed with a rare lung disease.¹⁰⁵ After years of battle he would die at the age of 6. Soon after, in July 1988, her husband Heinz Pagels fell to his death in a hiking accident. Such terrible misfortune would drive anyone into grief. Pagels’ response to these tragedies shows unmistakably how revision of Christian memory is intertwined with renewed attachments to the Christian tradition. In her scholarship written

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 118: “Only by suppressing Gnosticism did orthodox leaders establish that system of organization which united all believers into a single institutional structure.” Ibid, 141: “For ideas alone do not make a religion powerful, although it cannot succeed without them; equally important are social and political structures that identify and unite people into a common affiliation.” Ibid, 142: “Had Christianity remained multiform, it might well have disappeared from history. . . I believe we owe the survival of the Christian tradition to the organization and theological structure that the emerging church developed.”

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 134.

¹⁰² Brown, “The Christians Who Lost Out.” Jan 20, 1980.

¹⁰³ Dart, “Book on Gnosticism Wins Honors, Stirs Controversy,” LA Times, April 26, 1980.

¹⁰⁴ *The Gnostic Gospels* received the National Book Award and National Book Critics Circle Award. It would eventually be included in HarperCollins “100 Best Spiritual Books of the Twentieth Century.” Pagels received a MacArthur Prize Fellowship in 1981.

¹⁰⁵ Details of this period are found primarily in Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 3-29.

after her break from Evangelical Christianity, most especially *The Gnostic Gospels*, Pagels had charted alternative ways of being Christian. Visited by tragedy, with her life and personal identity thrown into flux, Pagels would then reattach to the Christian tradition that she had revisioned in her scholarship.

On a run the morning after Mark's diagnosis, Pagels instinctively found herself drawn into the Church of the Heavenly Rest in New York. Soothed by the music, atmosphere, and symbols she took in from the back of behind the pews, Pagels thought "here is a family that knows how to face death."¹⁰⁶ She had not been in a church since she was a teenager, but Pagels began to attend services there. In her words, in the church "my defenses fell away, exposing storms of grief and hope. . . after decades of absence, I experienced the *power* of worship in new ways (*italics mine*)."¹⁰⁷ Pagels found belonging in a community, ritual channels to alleviate her grief, and experienced the transformative power laying in religious symbols. She was only driven to reconnect to the Christian tradition after grief had destabilized her sense of self.

Beyond Belief, ostensibly Pagels' examination of *The Gospel of Thomas*, is her first book to deal at length with the The Nag Hammadi Library since NHC texts after *The Gnostic Gospels*.¹⁰⁸ Written after two watershed books, Michael Williams' *Rethinking Gnosticism* and Karen King's *What is Gnosticism?*, challenged the integrity and usefulness of the category Gnosticism, Pagels in her book abandons not just Gnosticism, but the adjective "gnostic."¹⁰⁹ *Thomas* and other texts are taken as evidence of "a much wider range of Christian groups than we had ever known before." The Christians they were written by and for were "seekers," not Gnostics.¹¹⁰ Analysis of the book, however, makes clear that only the language had changed. Pagels' presentation of "seekers" largely recapitulates the Gnostics, and the Church Fathers have only become more severe. What has changed is simply this: Pagels herself seeks to reattach to Christianity by broadening the tradition at its base.

To this end, Pagels seeks to answer some very personal questions in *Beyond Belief*: "why do so many of us still find [Christianity] compelling, whether or not we belong to a church, and despite difficulties we may have with particular beliefs and practices? *What is it about Christian*

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 3.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 14.

¹⁰⁸ *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent* does include the chapter "Gnostic Improvisations on Genesis," but the remainder of the book contains no references to NHC texts.

¹⁰⁹ See section "Karen King, Hal Taussig, and A New New Testament" below.

¹¹⁰ Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 29.

tradition that we love – and what is it that we *cannot* love? (italics mine).¹¹¹ What one can love and not love maps well onto the Gnostics and Church Fathers in *Gnostic Gospels*. For example, in the chapter “Gospels in Conflict: John and Thomas,” the issue of the Christology is again debated. Where John 14:6 depicts Jesus as “the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except by me,” Thomas stresses “everyone in creation receives an innate capacity to know God.”¹¹² This innate capacity is understood as light (φῶς) that, while concentrated in Jesus, is everywhere: “Jesus said, ‘I am the light which is before all things. It is I who am all things. From me all things came forth. From me all things extend. Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me.’”¹¹³ Pagels again presents church fathers, particularly Irenaeus, as hostile to such teachings. Irenaeus brands as “heretics” those who “call humankind the God of all things, also calling him *light*, and *blessed*, and *eternal*.”¹¹⁴

The church fathers as presented in *Beyond Belief* feel compelled to eradicate an experiential, mystical approach to Christianity that would destabilize and delegitimize the church. Irenaeus is quoted to malign interpretations of scripture or theology borne from experience: “For they [heretics] ascribe the things that happen to human beings, and whatever they recognize themselves as experiencing, to the divine word.”¹¹⁵ Only the church, founded on apostolic succession, provided a trustworthy path to salvation. Irenaeus concludes the *Refutation* calling for all “heretics” and “followers of Valentinus” to be excommunicated.¹¹⁶

Pagels articulates how, in the course of her own life, she found such experiential forms of Christian practice comforting: “I sometimes encountered, in churches and elsewhere. . . something compelling, powerful, even terrifying that I could not ignore, and I had come to see that, beside *belief*, Christianity involves *practice* – and paths toward transformation.”¹¹⁷ In NHC texts such as *The Apocryphon of John*, Pagels sees evidence early forms of Christianity sought to articulate this sense of transformation. The birth of Eve from Adam’s side in this text is read to as the awakening of his spiritual capacity.¹¹⁸ Luminous *epinoia* descends in order to “work with

¹¹¹ Ibid, 6.

¹¹² Ibid, 46.

¹¹³ Ibid 52. It must be noted that Pagels makes no effort here to distinguish this saying, which no scholar I am aware of attributes to Jesus of Nazareth himself, from sayings typically attributed to the historical Jesus.

¹¹⁴ Irenaeus AH 1.30.1, quoted in Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 55. It must further be noted that here Pagels is citing Irenaeus’ statement on the Ophites as a proxy to condemn Thomas. In other words, the comparative category of Gnosticism is still operative, even if it is not visible.

¹¹⁵ Irenaeus AH 2.13.3, quoted in Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 145.

¹¹⁶ Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 156.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 143. It is evident here that Pagels’ is alluding to Otto’s *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. See Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, 12-40.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 164.

him [Adam], and restore him to his full being, and teach him about the descent of his kind, and show the way to ascend, the way he came down.”¹¹⁹ *Epinia* is the capacity “that conveys genuine *insight*.” Insight, it will be recalled, is the translation of *gnosis* Pagels offered in *The Gnostic Gospels*.¹²⁰

As she concludes *Beyond Belief*, Pagels makes explicit why the shift in discourse (from Gnostic to seeker, heresy to alternative christianities) is so important. As a historian, she is keenly aware that tradition is not static: “religious traditions survive through time only as their adherents relive and reimagine them and, in the process, continually transform them.”¹²¹ Only guardians of the tradition will argue it is unchanging.¹²² Where Pagels once insisted that theological unity was necessary to the survival of the early church, here she claims expulsion of the “heretics” in the antiquity impoverished the tradition. “Heretics” were left wandering alone, despite their desire to remain within the Christian tradition that remained their “primary source of inspiration.”¹²³ The rediscovery of *Thomas* and the NHC offers the possibility of rejoining the lost teachings to the living tradition, *epinia* to belief, much as Pagels had done in her own journey as a Christian.

Documentaries

From the mid-twentieth to the early twenty-first century, television came to play an increasingly dominant role in American culture. America’s shift to a “television culture” began in the 1950’s. The impact of television on news production played a pivotal role in the dissemination and reception of news in the 1960’s, from the debates between John Kennedy and Richard Nixon to full-color reports from the frontlines in Viet Nam.¹²⁴ The 1980’s and 1990’s witnessed the explosion in number of cable television networks and subscribers. Between 1980 and 1998 the number of cable networks rose from 24 to 171. By 2000, 65 million households had some form of cable.¹²⁵ The proliferation of rental services (Blockbuster, Netflix, Redbox) and

¹¹⁹ *Apocryphon of John*, 20.20-25, quoted in *Beyond Belief*, 164.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 165. See above for Pagels’ definition of *gnosis* as “insight.” *The Gnostic Gospels*, xix.

¹²¹ Ibid, 112.

¹²² “Christian leaders who deny that such experience can teach us anything about God have often identified themselves as guardians of an unchanging tradition whose “faithfulness” consists in handing down only what they received from ancient witnesses, neither adding nor subtracting anything.” Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 182.

¹²³ Ibid, 183.

¹²⁴ Druckman, “The Power of Television Images: The First Kennedy-Nixon Debate Revisited.” Mandelbaum, “Vietnam: The Television War”; Ellison, *Vietnam: A Television History*.

¹²⁵ Parsons, *Blue Skies: A History of Cable Television*; “Cable’s Story.”

streaming options (Netflix, Hulu, Youtube) further diversified available media while also giving films and programs longer afterlives than had been possible with syndication.

Within the rise of television culture, documentaries have come to play an increasingly prominent role in the construction of cultural memory. Early Christianity and the Nag Hammadi Codices are no exception. Only one documentary on the codices was funded and broadcast prior to the mid-1990's: "The Gnostics," a four-part series for BBC Four in 1987. Beginning in the late-90's, however, cable networks and public broadcasting stations started to produce a range of documentaries that pertain to the NHC. Popular documentaries have been produced by Arts and Entertainment (Mysteries of the Bible: Who Wrote the Bible?, 1996), ABC News (In Search for Jesus, 2000); PBS (From Jesus to Christ, 2003), the History Channel (Time Machine: Banned from the Bible, 2003), The BBC Four (The Lost Gospels, 2006), National Geographic (The Gospel of Judas, 2006), and CNN (Finding Jesus, 2015). Such documentaries have proven quite popular. "The Gospel of Judas" brought in 7 million viewers when initially broadcast, and all of these documentaries have afterlives through youtube, Netflix, and DVD purchases.

This section analyzes the role such documentaries play in reconstructing early Christian memory through their descriptions of the Nag Hammadi codices NHC. Three points must be kept in mind. First, documentaries are produced with the same economic pressures as any other television program. Camera crews, editors, writers, interviewers, travel budgets, researchers, make-up, craft services – all of these things are expenses that must be met. No station intends to take a loss on such a program. The final product must be one that can generate advertising revenue, media attention, and an afterlife in streaming media. Dry academic debate will not ensure this. Elements of narrative – a quest, a protagonist-antagonist, or a sensational tale – are crucial. – will be given prominent positions. Popular academics will be chosen as talking heads over unfamiliar faces. And the need to find a larger audience will require framing the Nag Hammadi codices NHC to speak to as many potential viewers as possible.

Second, documentaries reflect the interests of potential viewers. As a predominantly Christian nation, American audiences will be much more interested in the texts from the NHC that impact early Christian memory than those which do not. All major documentaries focus on issues and figures already in early Christian memory, such as Jesus, Mary Magdalene, or Judas Iscariot. No documentaries on "The Lost Gospels of Seth" or "Finding Allogenes" have been funded. Beyond the general interest in early Christianity, viewers also need to feel compelled to

watch the program. Doing so requires the producers offer something to the viewer, namely new knowledge or a compelling counter-memory.

Third, documentaries help to mold the interests of their audiences. Comparing “The Gnostics” (1987) with documentaries produced in the 2000’s will bring this point into sharp relief. Only when the NHC were framed more explicitly in terms of early Christian memory did documentaries and books on them become best-sellers. While Pagels’ *The Gnostic Gospels* has been widely read and celebrated, only her *Beyond Belief* became a New York Times best-seller. This, in the immediate wake of her appearances on “From Jesus to Christ” and “Time Machine: Banned from the Bible.” Similarly, National Geographic’s “The Gospel of Judas” netted 7 million viewers when it aired April 9, 2006.¹²⁶ While the accompanying book was published on April 6th, it did not find its way onto the New York Times best-seller list until two weeks later, or April 23rd. After which time it remained on the non-fiction list for six weeks, reaching as high as number three.

In short, as documentaries come to reflect the interests in early Christianity of their audiences and narrate their specials to focus on the Nag Hammadi codices NHC as early alternative Christianities, viewers came to regard the Nag Hammadi codices NHC almost exclusively as a library of early, alternative approaches to Christianity in the past.

The Gnostics

BBC Four’s “The Gnostics” was written and directed by Tobias Churton. Most of his research was conducted at the Rittman Library in Amsterdam, one of the most extensive private libraries of western esotericism texts in the world. Since his work on this series, Churton has written twenty books on figures and themes in western esotericism, such as Aleister Crowley, the Rosicrucians, and sexuality in Gnostic texts.¹²⁷ As the first major documentary devoted to the NHC, “The Gnostics” provides a snapshot of the ways these texts were presented as heretical Christian texts even as they were considered part of the longer history of western esotericism in the west.

“The Gnostics” relies on three scholars to illuminate the finds from Nag Hammadi: Gilles Quispel, Elaine Pagels, and Hans Jonas. Churton’s presentation of the Gnostics manages to synthesize these three voices. Unique amongst the documentaries, “The Gnostics” highlights

¹²⁶ <http://brandedcontent.adage.com/pdf/NatGeosection.pdf>

¹²⁷ Churton, *Aleister Crowley: A Biography*; Idem, *The Invisible History of the Rosicrucians*; Idem, *Gnostic Mysteries of Sex*.

cosmic dualism, the archons, and the Demiurge. Jonas stresses that the ancient Gnostics were concerned with how to escape from an evil, illusory world. Pagels, alternately, stresses the Christian character of these texts and what they can tell us about earliest Christianity: “I find that [early Christian] diversity more exciting, more human picture. It brings up questions in the Christian tradition in a much more vital way.”¹²⁸ She presents Gnostics as Christians who sought the truth within themselves. Texts like *The Gospel of Thomas*, *Thomas the Contender*, and *Dialogue of the Savior* are presented as the byproduct of Gnostics meditating on a saying of Jesus until a new, imaginative dialogue develops between the Gnostic and Christ.

It is Gilles Quispel who clearly plays the most prominent role on-camera and off. The structure of the series follows Quispel’s own blueprint of *gnosis* as a spiritual undercurrent in western history that serves as an alternative to faith and reason. Quispel’s definition of gnosis (“knowledge of the heart,” non-rational and imaginative knowledge) and equation of gnosis with deep, transformative experience is accepted throughout. Groups and individuals covered in the film recapitulate those Quispel identified as parts of the gnostic tradition: Cathars, Hermetic magicians, Jacob Boehme, John Dee, the Rosicrucians, up through until Rudolph Steiner, Herman Hesse and Carl Jung.

Associating the NHC with a historical tradition of *gnosis* means that the primary theme in the series is antagonism between orthodoxy and heresy.¹²⁹ Many of the figures cited by Quispel were accused of heresy (Boehme, Dee, etc.). Some, such as Giovanni Bruno and the Cathars, were put to death. The hostility between orthodoxy and heresy is highlighted in presentations of the NHC. Irenaeus of Lyon and a Valentinian Christian by the name of Narkissos are portrayed in a heated exchange over whether there should be four gospels or many more. Narkissos screams “you fear the freedom of the Gospel which you preach!”¹³⁰ Catholics and Gnostic Christians debate the role of women in the church. Athanasius’ 39th Festal Letter is hypothesized as the reason the texts were buried. Yet, in Quispel’s words, these Pachomian monks found in “these scriptures an inherent holiness of quality” and could not destroy them.

What the NHC ultimately represent in “The Gnostics” is a lost form of Christianity that is better suited to modernity than the orthodox tradition. Rosamonde Miller’s *Ecclesia Gnostica Mysteriorum*, a Gnostic Church in Palo Alto, California, is depicted in part four. The

¹²⁸ “The Gnostics, part 1.”

¹²⁹ The series refers to the “Gnostic heresy” countless times. Quispel states “Gnosis is always branded a heresy” in part 3.

¹³⁰ “The Gnostics” part 1.

congregants are identified as “the first Gnostics in history who are free to express their heresy. They do not face repression or slaughter.”¹³¹ There are no dogmatic creeds there, no expectations of membership, nor a requirement one be Christian. It is depicted as a small church for seekers. But for Quispel, such small churches are not enough. He is adamant throughout that *gnosis* is ideally suited to the modern person insofar as it is introspective, experiential, and transformative. As he puts it, “we must consider whether Christianity has rejected in Gnosis something of its own heart.”¹³²

1996-2003: Jesus and the Canon

In the wake of the Jesus Seminar’s publication of *The Five Gospels*, cable and public networks began to provide more Biblical studies content. Unsurprisingly, the first scholars to be featured were Fellows of the seminar, especially John Dominic Crossan, Marvin Meyer, and Robert Funk.¹³³ A&E, ABC, PBS, and The History Channel all broadcast major documentaries during this period. These documentaries focused on the historical Jesus and the construction of canon. No explicit documentaries about the NHC were made at this time. Instead, individual texts from the NHC that speak to issues of the historical Jesus or the New Testament canon, particularly *The Gospel of Thomas* and *The Gospel of Mary*, were discussed alongside their traditional counterparts.¹³⁴ As such, in these documentaries the NHC increasingly became a symbol of pre-Nicean early Christian diversity, with individual texts overshadowing the library as a whole.

In terms of historical Jesus research, theThe documentaries during this period broke new ground in introducing viewers to biblical criticism. Elements of the canonical gospels such as the virgin birth in Bethlehem, miracle stories, crucifixion accounts, and resurrection visions are presented with the utmost skepticism by scholars like Crossan, Paula Frederikson, and Stephen Patterson.¹³⁵ Jesus’ sayings are upheld as the most reliable witness to the historical Jesus. In “Who Wrote the Bible?,” the author of *The Gospel of Thomas* is claimed to have had “intimate

¹³¹ “The Gnostics” part 4.

¹³² “The Gnostics” part 1.

¹³³ Crossan appeared in the series “Mysteries of the Bible,” “Banned from the Bible,” “From Jesus to Christ.”

¹³⁴ I am of course aware *The Gospel of Mary* is part of BG 8502 and not the NHC, but it becomes tedious to indicate the separate locations every time.

¹³⁵ Patterson appears on “Who Wrote the Bible?,” Frederiksen on “From Jesus to Christianity,” and Crossan on both programs.

knowledge of Jesus.”¹³⁶ “From Jesus to Christianity” emphasizes that Q and *The Gospel of Thomas* give us the best access to Jesus’ teachings before they were modified to fit the perspectives of early Jewish-Christian communities.¹³⁷ The real historical Jesus preached an “ethical eschatology,” not the apocalyptic expectation found in Matthew and Luke. His message is to *do something* to combat evil in the world.¹³⁸ In short, *Thomas* develops a portrait of Jesus quite different than the familiar one from canonical gospels, but this portrait better resembles the historical Jesus himself.

Issues of canon formation – what went in, what got left out, and why – began to show themselves a remarkably attractive documentary theme in this period. Just as the traditional picture of Jesus was shown to be that of the winners of history, the New Testament canon is a *political* instrument, not a window onto true Christian history. As Marvin Meyer states, “the majority decide what is heresy.”¹³⁹ “In this context, the NHC Nag Hammadi codices serves as an icon of forgotten Christianities that had been suppressed by emerging orthodoxy. Each of the documentaries refers to the Nag Hammadi codices NHC as the property of a “Gnostic sect.” The texts highlighted are exclusively Christian: *The Gospels of Thomas, Truth, Phillip, Mary* and *The Dialogue of the Savior*.¹⁴⁰ As presented by Pagels and Meyer, these texts represent mystical forms of Christianity that were more welcoming to divergences of opinion and female leadership. The collectors of the Nag Hammadi codices NHC themselves are uniformly presented as “persecuted.” As Stephen Patterson has it, Gnostics were not allowed to practice their faith openly, so they fled to Nag Hammadi as a refuge from persecution.¹⁴¹ Each documentary also references Athanasius’ 39th Festal Letter as the impetus for these texts to be buried. Yet as the narrator from “Banned from the Bible” relays it, “they loved these books [and therefore could not destroy them]. . . they were buried, waiting for another generation and another time to see the light of day.”¹⁴²

2004-present: “A Battle of Words”

¹³⁶ “Who Wrote the Bible?” (youtube part 9).

¹³⁷ It should be noted that the main speakers on *The Gospel of Thomas* in this documentary are Helmut Koester, JD Crossan, and Elaine Pagels. So again, the Harvard-C Claremont nexus.

¹³⁸ These are the claims of Crossan.

¹³⁹ “Banned from the Bible.”

¹⁴⁰ “Who Wrote the Bible?” references *The Gospel of Thomas* (sayings 24, 49, 38, and 92) and *Dialogue of the Savior*. “Banned from the Bible” references the *Gospels of Thomas, Truth, Phillip, and Mary*. “From Jesus to Christianity” references the *Gospels of Thomas, Truth, and Mary* as examples of “secret gospels.”

¹⁴¹ “Who Wrote the Bible?”

¹⁴² “Banned from the Bible.”

After 2003, two texts steered early Christian documentaries in a new direction. Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, while certainly a counter-memory of the historical Jesus, also features a complete historical reimagining of Mary Magdalene. The novel spawned widespread interest in *The Gospel of Mary* and historical-critical researches into her role in the early Jesus movement. Soon thereafter, the discovery of the Codex Tchacos generated even greater interest in counter-memories of figures in early Christian memory. *The Gospel of Judas* (as initially presented by National Geographic) provided the most inverted counter-memory yet: Judas as the most true and elevated apostle of Jesus. The sensationalism surrounding these two texts helped to bring alternative approaches to early Christianity to much wider audiences.

The Gospel of Mary had already been utilized in previous documentaries to discuss the role of women in early Christianity.¹⁴³ The publication of *The Da Vinci Code* ensured that scholars had to take inventory of *The Gospel of Phillip* and the counter-memory of Mary as sexual consort of Jesus. In the BBC's "The Lost Gospels," Stephen Emmel shows the original papyrus and points to where the lacunae begins. Emmel states "it most likely says kissed her on her lips many times," but this is likely a reference to the passing on of spiritual knowledge, not a sexual relationship.¹⁴⁴ The narrator responds, "Why shouldn't Jesus had had a sexual relationship to a woman?" In "Finding Jesus," Nicola Denzey-Lewis largely dismisses any possibility *Phillip* points to a historical relationship. Still, the sensation of this lacuna prompts both the BBC and CNN to offer fuller portraits of Mary Magdalene. She is presented as the first apostle, a mystic, a visionary, and a rich, elderly benefactor of the Jesus movement. Her memory was suppressed in favor of the penitent prostitute in order to support the male hierarchy of the early church. As Episcopal priest Peter Owen Jones puts it, "Mary Magdalene should have been the first Pope."¹⁴⁵

When it aired in April of 2006, "The Gospel of Judas" achieved an extraordinary number of viewers for a cable network. 7-plus million were drawn in by a possibility as simple as it was sensational: what if everything we thought about Judas Iscariot was wrong? National Geographic had brought on scholars of repute to translate and introduce the newly discovered text, including Stephen Emmel, Marvin Meyer, and Elaine Pagels. Meyer's role is to prove that the original text is not a forgery. Meyer concludes it is authentic based on radio-carbon dating, the narrative of where it was found, and, importantly, its striking resemblances to the Nag Hammadi Library.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ "Banned from the Bible," "From Jesus to Christianity," "Who Wrote the Bible?"

¹⁴⁴ "The Lost Gospels." The reference is to *The Gospel of Phillip*, NHC II, 3 63.34-37.

¹⁴⁵ "The Lost Gospels."

¹⁴⁶ "The Gospel of Judas." Meyer includes similar names of characters, worldview, the fact texts were written roughly the same time and found in roughly the same place.

The implication is if the *Gospel of Judas* can correct Christian memory, so too can the NHC. Discussion of the text itself focus on Judas' role as "the apostle despised by all." As represented by the National Geographic team, the Judas in this text was the only one who truly understood Jesus and sacrifices himself (and his memory in the church) in order for Jesus to fulfill his mission. Although the special emphasizes that *The Gospel of Judas* should be taken as evidence of the diversity of Christian thought in the second century, it does not stop there. At the end of the program, Craig Evans, currently a professor of Christian Origins at Houston Baptist University, states flatly that *The Gospel of Judas* does not give us access to the historical Jesus or Judas. The camera quickly pans to Elaine Pagels in retort: "How does he know?"¹⁴⁷

In many ways, "Gospel of Judas" embodies the possibilities and perils of cultural memory being so closely tied to documentaries. The goal of the documentary and publication, as Frieda Nussberger-Tchacos put it, was "to rehabilitate Judas." "The Gospel of Judas" does a remarkable job of detailing how the image of Judas became increasingly negative from *Mark* to *John*, and speaks openly to how the canonical depiction of Judas helped legitimize anti-Semitism throughout Christian history. "The Gospel of Judas" attempts to invert this traditional memory.

However, it appears that the presentation of Judas made in the documentary was simply incorrect. April DeConick has argued for a re-reading of *The Gospel of Judas* in several media.¹⁴⁸ For purposes of this section, the most important of these is her role on CNN's "Finding Jesus." There, DeConick clarifies that Judas was not at all being referred to as the highest apostle, but rather as a demon whose eventual place was either with or as Ialdabaoth, above the twelve archons (equated here with the twelve apostles).¹⁴⁹ With terrifying visual effects, "Finding Judas" reinterprets Judas as a creature of fire, malice, and evil. While Pagels challenges DeConick's rereading, the presentation of DeConick's research on "Finding Jesus" makes it clear whom the editors of the program side with. Still, "Finding Jesus" brought in roughly 1 million viewers per episode – impressive for a documentary, but a fraction of what "The Gospel of Judas" brought in.¹⁵⁰ Nor did the accompanying book reach the New York Times best-seller list like *The Gospel of Judas*. It is hard not to conclude that the more extreme the counter-memory, the larger the audience will be, while less sensational corrections of the historical record reach far fewer persons.

¹⁴⁷ "The Gospel of Judas."

¹⁴⁸ DeConick, "Gospel Truth," New York Times 12-1-2007; Idem., *The Thirteenth Apostle: What the Gospel of Judas Really Says*; "Finding Jesus," episode 5.

¹⁴⁹ One may also find this point in DeConick, *The Thirteenth Apostle*, 112-113.

¹⁵⁰ <http://deadline.com/2015/03/finding-jesus-cnn-ratings-bill-weir-1201384514/>

Conclusions

Analyzing the historical trajectory of documentaries on the Nag Hammadi codices NH leads to a number of conclusions. First, the emphasis on the NHC as part of a tradition of *gnosis* drops out entirely and is replaced by focused specials on early Christian memory. While the library as a whole remains important as an icon of early Christian diversity, texts like the gospels of *Thomas*, *Mary*, *Phillip*, and *Judas* receive most of the attention. In practice, this means that non-Christian texts from the collection (e.g., *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth*) merit no mentions. Moreover, Ttexts from the collection that are arguably Christian but convey a more acosmic Gnosticism like *The Apocryphon of John* or *The Gospel of the Egyptians* are “forgotten” as well.

Second, the tension between heresy and orthodoxy through time found in “The Gnostics” gives way to a presentation of early Christian diversity where orthodoxy is a political tool, not an arbiter of truth. Every later special depicts Irenaeus of Lyon, at his desk, struggling to write *Adversus Haereses* in the wake of watching nearly 100 Christians publically tortured and murdered by Roman forces. His need to consolidate the Christian movement is explicitly linked to martyrdom and the threat of the Roman Empire. The implication is that now, with the threat of persecution removed, why adhere solely to the New Testament canon and creedal Christ? Non-canonical texts like the NHC reflect possibilities – what Christianity once was, and what it can be again – with the threat of persecution removed.

Finally, the economic realities of documentary film-making have led to a presentation of the NHC which is audience-friendly. Depictions of the archons, Demiurge, and acosmic dualism on these specials become more infrequent over time. Jesus is associated with the wisdom teacher of *Thomas*. Presentations of an adoptionist or docetic Christology are infrequent, if not entirely absent.¹⁵¹ When the story of Adam and Eve is re-told from Nag Hammadi codices NHC texts the emphasis is inevitably on the divine knowledge of the tree. Mentions of Eve being raped by archons, giving birth to demonic sons, and sexuality itself being part of a cosmic trap are absent. In contrast, these documentaries emphasize these texts as exemplars of early Christian feminism, the divine-human potential in every person, and a diversity of thought that are synchronistically keyed to the present.

¹⁵¹ Docetism is discussed in BBC’s “The Lost Gospels.” “The Gospel of Judas” did stress that the blood atonement was unnecessary and therefore Christ was not crucified.

Lost Gospels – Nag Hammadi Library in Fiction

One site of cultural memory where the Nag Hammadi Library's influence has been relatively ignored is genre fiction, specifically the "lost gospels" genre.¹⁵² Novels in this genre focus on the find of an object of great importance to Early Christianity (ranging from the Shroud of Turin to a variety of lost gospels) and imagine what impact the archeological find might have on contemporary, organized Christianity.¹⁵³ While works of fiction, these books question the relationship between mainstream tradition and the real historical Jesus, or why the New Testament includes certain texts and excludes others. The antagonist in these novels is a nefarious Church going to extremes to keep the lid on these finds lest the whole body of organized Christianity be dismembered.

Robert Price is right to identify the subtext of these novels is "abiding and uncomfortable issues of religious faith."¹⁵⁴ Believers struggle with what to make of the evidence arising from historical-criticism, rediscovered gospels and archaeological digs. In its more astute incarnations the "lost gospels" genre provide narratives of the psychological response to these challenges. Moreover, such tales construct a picture of "the church" or "Catholicism" that expresses the author's frustrations with and critiques of organized religion. I would extend Price's analysis by recognizing how each of these novels offer examples of how popular authors understand Christianity's relationship to its ancient past, and how these new finds should alter Christian identity today.

Ursula and Terry Loucks, authors of *Burning Words*, and Tucker Malarkey, author of *Resurrection*, offer novels that cast the NHC in the role of "lost gospel."¹⁵⁵ The plot of both novels take place during the interregnum between Muhammad Ali's find of the NHC and their publication in the 1970's. Both depict the Church leaders as secretly responsible for the slow process to publication. Agents of the church are out to destroy the codices so their contents will never be published. Each author fills their narrative with real historical individuals, facts and geography of this period to an extent that it blurs the distinction between history and fiction.¹⁵⁶ Woven within these alternative histories are interpretations of the NHC that show what these

¹⁵² Price, *Secret Scrolls*.

¹⁵³ The primary study of this genre is Robert Price, *Secret Scrolls*.

¹⁵⁴ *ibid* 3.

¹⁵⁵ Loucks and Loucks, *Burning Words* (1998). Malarkey, *Resurrection* (2006).

¹⁵⁶ On the blurring of history and fiction in novels of memory read Astrid, *Memory in Culture*, 141-171.

texts offer for Christianity today, primarily a non-exclusivist form of Christianity, appreciation of women, and recognition of human-divine identity.

Burning Words

Burning Words (hereafter BW) begins with Roman soldiers preparing to attack the Library at Alexandria in 391 CE. Christian monks Ptah and Pachomius retrieve the contents of the NHC (including the Gospel of Mary) from the library and pack them into an earthenware jar. The monks send the jar down the Nile to be buried until it is safe for the “true teachings of Jesus” to be released again (BW 34). Back in 1971, a Harvard professor and Mayan archaeologist named Christina Sheridan is working in Mexico. Soon she receives a letter informing her that her uncle and benefactor, Colby, had been found dead in Cairo in pursuit of a document vital to understanding Christian origins. Christina flies to Egypt and, with a key willed from her uncle, unlocks a vault with files that seem to relate to mysterious early Christian sources, including the Dead Sea Scrolls and *Quelle*.¹⁵⁷

In what follows Christina falls in love with a young New Testament scholar named Riggs Parker who teaches her about the Dead Sea Scrolls, the NHC, and New Testament historical criticism, challenging her childhood faith in the process. These two are stalked by “Fundamentalist Christians” out to destroy any document that questions a literalist interpretation of the New Testament.

Riggs and Christina’s adventures lead them to discover a series of documents and artifacts that build towards a radically new interpretation of Jesus. Riggs and Christina break into the Cairo Museum so James M. Robinson (to whom the book is dedicated and who appears as a character in it), can take the photos that became the facsimile edition (BW 118).¹⁵⁸ They travel to India to visit a “Tomb of Jesus” and consider the possibility Jesus spent his “lost years” studying Buddhist Sutras, hence the “Buddhist flavor” to the Nag Hammadi writings (BW 189).¹⁵⁹ The suspense of the novel builds until the final confrontation between the fundamentalists and the research team, now with Q in their possession.

By and large, though, the novel is written to convey of information regarding Early Christian history and its impact through the eyes of a lapsed Catholic. As Christina puts it, “The

¹⁵⁷ *Quelle* is a reference to the hypothetical sayings source from which the gospels of Matthew and Luke borrowed.

¹⁵⁸ *The Facsimile Edition of the Nag Hammadi Codices* (12 vols) was published between 1972-1984.

¹⁵⁹ A comparable idea of Jesus’ “Lost Years” is found in Levi Dowling’s *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus Christ*. The “tomb” of Jesus in India is a reference to the Roza Bal shrine in Kashmir.

Nag Hammadi gospels were more than a time capsule, weren't they? They were a time bomb" (BW 138). The authors' presentation of this "time bomb" is significantly influenced by the work of the Harvard-Claremont team, particularly James Robinson and Helmut Koester and *Trajectories Through Early Christianity*. The authors repeats claims of Robinson and Koester, for example, that sayings gospels were the first Christian genre, and that *Thomas* contains sayings more primitive than parallels in the synoptics.¹⁶⁰ *Thomas* is the first sayings gospel and contains the true words of Jesus (BW 223). For Christina it is *Thomas* that helps her overcome the blows dealt to her faith by historical-criticism.

In the Loucks' presentation the true Christian message has nothing to do with the kerygma, miracles or apocalypticism. Instead, the Jesus of Q and Thomas is simply "an enlightened sage" who inspired individuals to recognize their own inner divinity much like the Buddha (BW 148). Such a historical Jesus also fits the perennialism and science mysticism of the authors. The myths of the Buddha and Jesus are paradigms giving meaning to individual life narratives, while an entire second plotline in the book concerns the development of Zukav and Capra's theories of "quantum entanglement" via the Bells Theorem group at Stanford (BW196 and 208; 223).¹⁶¹ Dramatic statements of divinity on the part of Jesus, such as the Logion 77, "I am the All," or Logion 22 "Break a piece of wood," are taken by the authors to suggest Jesus had intuited Bells nonlocality theorem and the interconnectedness of quanta (BW 183). Last, the Jesus of the NHC is presented as open to combining alternative religious viewpoints, such as Buddhism or the Egyptian Isis cult, offering a welcome alternative to "dogmatic" and "closeminded" Catholicism (BW 32-34).

Resurrection

The second novel being read here, *Resurrection* (hereafter R), was written by Tucker Malarkey to bring more attention to the NHC: "The reappearance of gospels as authentic as those of the New Testament should have been a momentous event, with much fanfare and attention. Instead, only a few people took note" (R 1). After reading Pagels' *Gnostic Gospels* Malarkey set out to learn as much as he could about these historical figures, reading John Dart's *Jesus of*

¹⁶⁰ See Robinson, "Logoi Sophon," 79-80 and 102-103; and Koester, "One Jesus and Four Primitive Gospels," 171-184.

¹⁶¹ On the Bell's Theorem group, see:

Heresy and History, Smith's *Jesus the Magician*, The Gnostic Bible and the Nag Hammadi Library in English.¹⁶²

The novel begins in 1947 and centers on one Gemma Bastian. Gemma is a deeply disillusioned former army nurse for England who was raped by the very soldiers she cared for. When she returns to London Gemma receives word her father, an eminent archaeologist named Charles, has mysteriously died. She travels to his last residence in Cairo and stays with family friends the Lazars. Michael and Anthony, half-brothers in the Lazar clan, are her alternating love interests.

As Gemma begins to investigate the details of her father's work and life it becomes clear that he had been involved in the circulation of the NHC after their discovery. Through analysis of these texts he was building an entirely new theory of Christian origins. In her search to understand her father Gemma's story is woven into a (fictionalized) version of the events immediately after the NHC find. In it, Togo Mina attempts to re-assemble the codices for the Cairo Museum, Phocion Tano murders anyone who gets too close to his find, and Mrs. Dattari, owner of the library, is Charles' lover.¹⁶³ Dattari ultimately bequeathes the NHC to Christina. As in *Burning Words* the final scene involves a bloody face-off between Christina's group and emissaries of the Catholic Church out to prevent these findings from coming to public awareness at all costs.

The counter-memory of early Christianity that led the Catholic Church to murder Charles is not necessarily novel, but it indicates what Malarkey understands the massive impact of the NHC to be: "Christianity rewritten – complete with a new New Testament" (R 296). Charles found that many of the elements of the Jesus story betrayed influence of Egyptian religion, and that he was a magician who had spent his "lost years" in Egypt (R 159). Moreover, Charles had come to believe that Jesus had an inner and outer circle of disciples, and that this inner circle was reflected in the Nag Hammadi texts of Thomas, Philip, Mary and the "Gospel of Thunder" (sic) (R 216). Charles, and later Gemma, read these four gospels as evidence the early Catholic Church "silenced" women, especially Mary Magdalene, and that restoration of the true and original Christianity requires the reconstitution of female leadership (R 307).

¹⁶² *The Gnostic Bible* is a compilation of early Christian and Jewish texts, edited and translated by William Barnstone and Marvin Meyer.

¹⁶³ This account is, of course, heavily fictionalized. Yet it is based on the account provided by Dart, *Jesus of Heresy and History*, 1-49.

Christina finds evidence for early Christian feminism in the following passage from *The Gospel of Phillip*:

When Eve was still in Adam death did not exist. When she was separated from him death came into being. If he enters again and attains his former self, death will be no more.¹⁶⁴ Christina interprets this as Jesus' recognition that both male and female views are necessary for true religion, and that women's place in teaching and leadership must be restored (R 225). This social-ecclesiastical interpretation of *The Gospel of Phillip* is certainly novel. In *Phillip*, unity of male and female refers to the *νυμφών* (*nymphon*), or bridal chamber, understood as the wedding of the individual and their divine and holy angel.¹⁶⁵ What this interpretation points to is the way in which the author of *Resurrection* frames the impact of the NHC in terms of church history – and church today.

Mularkey asserts that the church is rendered unnecessary by the “original content and spirit of Jesus’ teachings” (R 330). The true Jesus reflected in *Thomas* never performed miracles, prophecy or preached eschatology.¹⁶⁶ He was “more of a sage, more of a Gnostic” (R 290). Jesus’ proclamation in *The Gospel of Thomas* that “The Kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known,” suggests there is no need for mediation of a priest.¹⁶⁷ If one can look into oneself for the divine, there is no single path to God. Religious fundamentalism is a sham. As Malarkey concludes, the “closest disciples believed that there was truth in all religions, that all sacred texts should be celebrated” (R 330).

Taken together, *Burning Words* and *Resurrection* bear witness to the ways not just the NHC, but the secondary scholarship on them, is altering how people remember Christian history. Robinson’s famous account of the NHC find and route to publication is used as source material in both novels.¹⁶⁸ The delay in publication and translation of the NHC offers a projection screen for conspiracy. In the same way the codices are understood to have been buried to escape a militant Roman Catholic church, the NHC were prevented from reaching the public eye by churches terrified of their impact. Lincoln’s “dialectic of the past with the present” is evident here.

¹⁶⁴ Malarkey, *Resurrection*, 225. Quoting *The Gospel of Phillip* (NHC II,3 68.22-26).

¹⁶⁵ On the unification of the bride-bridegroom as the unification of a spiritual person with their syzygy-angel in order to enter the Pleroma, see Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed*, 99-100, 116-117

¹⁶⁶ This presentation of the Thomasine Jesus is closely modeled on Koester’s portrayal in “One Jesus and Four Primitive Gospels.”

¹⁶⁷ *The Gospel of Thomas* (NHC II,2 32.25-33.1)

¹⁶⁸ Robinson, “Introduction,” 1-25.

The portrait of the historical Jesus developed by these authors are different, but each rely on theories that *Thomas* contains original words of Jesus to legitimize reading other NHC texts as examples of his true message (regardless of their own dating). Their Jesus is like Pagels' "sage" and "Zen teacher," open to alternative religions and eastern mysticism. Selective readings allow them to ignore passages referring to apocalyptic prophecies, and to avoid references to a docetic or avatar Christology, such as that found in Sethian texts like *The Apocryphon of John*.¹⁶⁹ Instead, the Jesus they find unearthed at Nag Hammadi is completely human and preaches that each individual should realize their own inner divinity.

Written prior to the publication of *A New New Testament*, these novels offer a glimpse of how the reconfiguration of Christian memory taking place in the academy came to impact religious laypersons. These authors identify as Christian, but are not religious leaders. They write these novels in order to come to grips with their own religious lives. As they read the NHC, it is identified to be a Christian library. Non-Christian texts from the collection are completely ignored. All texts are categorized as "Gospels": hence *The Gospel of Thunder*. The scholars who these novelists look to – Robinson, Koester, and Pagels – frame the NHC in terms of early Christian diversity. These novelists go one step beyond these scholars, however, in making claims that the church itself needs to alter its organization, or become unnecessary.

Karen King, Hal Taussig, and *A New New Testament*

In the conclusion of his book *Honest to Jesus*, Robert Funk issued "twenty-one theses" to revise Jesus for the 21st century and ignite "a new reformation."¹⁷⁰ Funk's final thesis was to "declare the New Testament a highly uneven and biased record of various early attempts to invent Christianity. Reopen the question of what documents belong among the founding witnesses. In a new New Testament, include dissenting points of view. Eliminate the less deserving parts."¹⁷¹

Funk offered more than a provocation. He set the process to create such a new New Testament in motion. His hope was to enlist Karen King, then Professor of Religious Studies at

¹⁶⁹ See for instance *The Apocryphon of John* (NHC II,1 2.1-15), where Christ appears as a plurality: the Father, the Mother, and the Son.

¹⁷⁰ See Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, 297-314. "A new reformation" is mentioned 306.

¹⁷¹ *ibid*, 314. See also 116-120 for Funk's elaboration of why a new New Testament is necessary: "The canon of the New Testament was developed, along with the creeds, as a way of excluding political enemies, so regarded because they deviated from institutional opinion or practice; the primary interest was to build a fence around right doctrine and hierarchic privilege. This also had the effect of consolidating ecclesiastical power."

Occidental College, to chair the project.¹⁷² She declined in early 1997 before becoming professor of Ecclesiastical History at Harvard. The Westar Institute put *A New New Testament* on the backburner. Although King did not spearhead the project, her scholarship in her early years at Harvard would serve as the impetus for Hal Taussig, a founding member of the Jesus Seminar, professor at Union Theological Seminary, and United Methodist pastor, to oversee the project himself. In 2013, *A New New Testament* was published. Tracing the evolution of this project from Funk's call to Taussig's publication exhibits how and why the discourse of "alternative Christianities" has replaced "Gnostic Christians" in the 21st century. To reconfigure and revivify Christianity in the present, its origins and scripture must be related to in a new way. To appropriate the NHC as early Christian scripture, Taussig, King, and others felt they had to expunge all associations of the library with the Gnostics.

Deconstruction and *What is Gnosticism?*¹⁷³

In 1996, Michael A. Williams of the University of Washington published a watershed book in Gnostic Studies: *Rethinking Gnosticism: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*. In it, Williams argued the category "Gnosticism" has proven hard to define and agree upon because of the diverse data it attempts to encompass.¹⁷⁴ Williams suggests that it would be better to begin afresh with categories that are purely constructs, designed for the sole purpose of describing the texts themselves.¹⁷⁵ For example, "biblical demiurgic traditions" could be used to locate texts that: a) ascribe creation and management of the cosmos to lower entities; and b) those within this class that incorporate or adapt Jewish and/or Christian scriptures.¹⁷⁶ Though "biblical demiurgical traditions" lacks the music or aura of the term "Gnosticism," it is coherent and applicable to certain texts we have. Further categories can be created to analyze different data so long as it is understood these are *scholarly constructs* that do not reify a non-existent religion in the ancient world.

¹⁷² Taussig, "Two Surprising Stories," 510.

¹⁷³ To be clear, I am not here concerned with assessing King's scholarship. As a reception historian, my concern is how her scholarship (regardless of soundness or validity) has impacted the public reception of the Nag Hammadi Library as religious documents and, where pertinent, how King herself has approached these texts as religious texts.

¹⁷⁴ Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism"*, 49–51.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 51–53.

¹⁷⁶ Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism*, 51.

Karen King was already stepping onto the path toward deconstruction when Williams' book was published. Funk had solicited her service after hearing her paper, "Christianity after Canon," at the 1996 Society of Biblical Literature meeting. King's challenge to the authority and legitimacy invested in the canon would serve as a springboard for her work over the next decade. In her *What is Gnosticism?* (2003) and *The Gospel of Mary Magdala* (2003), King would analyze the politics of canon and category formation in detail, ultimately coming to argue for a wholesale revaluation of early Christian historiography. Under the influence of King's scholarship, religious leaders such as Taussig have come to revise the early Christian memories preached to their congregations and, they hope, use the new texts to inspire "many different kinds of spiritual, personal, and social renewal and insight" *within* the churches.¹⁷⁷

In *What is Gnosticism?*, King accepts Williams' argument that Gnosticism is incoherent and should be retired.¹⁷⁸ She goes beyond Williams' in arguing why this category became so unseemly. For King, Gnosticism in modernity serves the same discursive purposes that "heresy" did in antiquity: it provides a religious "other" for those presenting themselves as "orthodox" (i.e., right belief). As a result, "[Gnosticism] has been classed as a marginal, sectarian, esoteric, mythical, syncretistic, parasitic and Oriental religion, in contrast to mainstream, authentic, ethnic, historical, rational, or universal religions, such as orthodox Christianity."¹⁷⁹ Gnosticism, however, never existed. It was invented to serve the politics of Christian identity formation. Unlike the heresiologists of the past, those who invented Gnosticism were not primarily church leaders. They were scholars, ranging from Adolph von Harnack to King's own undergraduate mentor, John D. Turner.¹⁸⁰

Recognizing that the politics of Christian identity formation are behind employment of the term "Gnosticism" also requires that we abandon the adjective "Gnostic."¹⁸¹ Like Gnosticism, King sees the adjective gnostic as unable to classify and understand the ancient texts we have, particularly the Nag Hammadi Library (NHL). Common attributes taken to be "gnostic" – anticosmic dualism, ascetic or libertine ethics, and Docetism – are at best partial and fail to encompass the diversity of texts in the Nag Hammadi codices NHL. Finally, King argues we should not call groups or individuals from the past "Gnostics (n.)." Certain scholars who are

¹⁷⁷ Taussig, "A Rich Explosion of Meaning," 543.

¹⁷⁸ King, *What is Gnosticism?*, 218.

¹⁷⁹ King, *What is Gnosticism?*, 3.

¹⁸⁰ Numerous scholars are taken to task for reinscribing heresiological discourse in *What is Gnosticism?*, including: Adolph von Harnack, The History of Religions School, Wilhelm Bousset, Rudolph Bultmann, Hans Jonas, John D. Turner, Birger Pearson, George MacRae, PHEME Perkins, and Gilles Quispel.

¹⁸¹

interested in retiring Gnosticism delimit the “gnostics” to those identified by Irenaeus as γνωστικοί (gnostics) in *Adversus Haeresis* 1.29-30 and those who share a similar myth.¹⁸² This category “gnostics” maps onto the Sethian corpus, or those texts which refer to Adam and Eve’s third son, Seth, as savior and revealer. King points out that we do not have a text from this group that uses *gnostikoi* as a term of self-appellation. Instead, they refer to themselves as “standing ones” or “immovable race.”¹⁸³ In her view, Irenaeus may just be using *gnostikoi* as a discursive term to mark off deviant Christians.

King’s approach to the Nag Hammadi codices NHL and early Christianity has implications for contemporary practice and belief. She recognizes this: “insofar as [religious tradition] is understood as under constant construction and reformation, there is room for human agency and thus human responsibility. . . In writing history, we construct not just the past but our own ethical, social, and political relationship to it.”¹⁸⁴ Deconstructing and retiring Gnosticism is an attempt by King to return texts that had been classified as “Gnostic” – and therefore *other* and outside early Christianity – back into the earliest period of tradition. Both the “proto-orthodox” heresiologists *and* contemporary leaders in the tradition can no longer be taken at their word when they call their version of history true, original, or pure. As historians rewrite Christian origins from a wider perspective, it will inevitably impact how those who relate to the Christian past understand their ethical, social, and political relationships to that past.

The politics of identity extends to the authority of the New Testament canon: “the multiformity of early Christianity becomes even more evident when we remove our canonical spectacles.”¹⁸⁵ Texts from the Nag Hammadi codices NHL and elsewhere are mis-read insofar as they are classified as heretical or non-canonical. The canon is a political symbol meant to invest authority in those who claim it, not a hallmark of truth, purity, or originality. For King, these newly discovered texts have to be read as documents that exhibit an astonishing variety of early Christian beliefs and practices that were only subsequently – in hindsight and for political reasons – classified as heretical or Gnostic. In turn:

“a fuller historical portrait of religious piety can enrich the funds of religious tradition, providing more complex theological resources to attend to the complex issues of our own

¹⁸² Ir. *Haer.* 1.29–30 (Rousseau/Doutreleau); Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 5–22; idem, “Prolegomena to the Study of Ancient Gnosticism,” 334–50. See also Logan, *Gnostic Truth*; idem, “Mystery”; Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 74–76.

¹⁸³ King, “Review: David Brakke: *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity*,” 299. See Williams, *The Immovable Race*, for an exposition of this problem.

¹⁸⁴ King, *What is Gnosticism?*, 246.

¹⁸⁵ King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*, 163.

day. One's own faith is not diminished by hearing other voices; it may even be strengthened and enriched."¹⁸⁶

Hal Taussig and the formation of *A New New Testament*

Hal Taussig (B: 1947) has served most of his adult life in **dual capacities**. Since receiving his PhD in 1975, Taussig has taught Biblical Studies and New Testament at a host of colleges, finally settling at Union Theological Seminary in New York.¹⁸⁷ At the same time, Taussig has served as a minister within the United Methodist Church, primarily Calvary United Methodist Church in Philadelphia. He continues in both roles to this day.

In 1980, Taussig was teaching at Claremont where he came into contact with the Claremont Institute on Antiquity and, by extension, members associated with the Coptic Gnostic Library project. In 1985, he was a founding member of Robert Funk's Jesus Seminar, and would eventually be enshrined as one of the core Fellows in *The Five Gospels*.¹⁸⁸ Taussig participated in the early meetings relating to *A New New Testament* under Funk's direction, but departed from Funk in wanting to retain all books of the canonical *New Testament*.¹⁸⁹ Nor was Taussig interested in undermining traditional Church authority. His goal was and is more modest: to introduce these newly rediscovered texts as a response to "the massive spiritual discontent and seeking I have witnessed among a broad spectrum of the North American public."¹⁹⁰

As a pastor-scholar, Taussig engages church communities while also analyzing them. In his visits to churches he found a new approach to Christianity he has come to label "progressive Christianity at the grassroots."¹⁹¹ By this he means a range of Christian groups –Protestant, Catholic, and non-denominational – who embody progressive-liberal values and are rethinking Christian practice, belief, and community. In his *A New Spiritual Home* (2006, hereafter ANSH), Taussig touches on nearly 1000 such churches in North America. The book highlights a range of "progressive" Christian beliefs and practices from these congregations: democratic structures that challenge hierarchies (ANSH 9, 32-33); abortion-rights advocacy (ANSH 11-12); use of non-Christian practices and symbols (ANSH 15-19); denial of anthropomorphism in favor of a

¹⁸⁶ King, *what is Gnosticism?*, 246.

¹⁸⁷ <https://myunion.utsnyc.edu/faculty-directory/hal-taussig>

¹⁸⁸ Funk, *The Five Gospels*, 536-537.

¹⁸⁹ Taussig, "Two Surprising Stories," 511.

¹⁹⁰ Taussig, "Two Surprising Stories," 511.

¹⁹¹ Taussig, *A New Spiritual Home: Progressive Christianity at the Grass Roots*.

discourse of energy (*ANSH* 25-27); affirm the epistemological significance of spiritual experience (*ANSH* 33); embrace of feminism and LGBT rights (*ANSH* 35-42); denial of Christian exclusivity (*ANSH* 43-47); and the denial of the bodily resurrection of Christ (*ANSH* 28). In Taussig's view, progressive Christianity is a necessary response to the challenges of religious pluralism, economic injustice, and the scientific explanation of the cosmos.¹⁹²

Taussig's goal for *A New New Testament* must be framed in terms of his hope for the expansion of this emergent progressive Christianity. He claims to find most individual Christians "traumatized" by scientific discovery, economic materialism, and corruption in the church.¹⁹³ As a pastor, Taussig came to find that when he preached and taught from *The Gospel of Thomas* or *Thunder: Perfect Mind*, the audiences would grow in size and express much more enthusiasm than they did for traditional texts.¹⁹⁴ Such individuals were experiencing spiritual discontent, but they were also searching for ways to answer it within a Christian frame of reference. He came to see "new perspectives and new resources might help those attached to it [Christianity]."¹⁹⁵ By enlarging the canon, contemporary Christians would be able to see their tradition anew, reconfigure their beliefs, and develop stronger affective attachments to Christian symbols and community.

Taussig reached out to a "council" of members to select the contents of *A New New Testament* in April 2011. One of the first to be invited was Karen King. Together King and Taussig would assemble a group of nineteen persons to the council: eleven ordained clergy, six scholars and graduate teachers of New Testament, two rabbis, and one representative of yogic traditions.¹⁹⁶ Three Evangelical leaders were invited but declined. A Roman Catholic priest and professor of Islam resigned for health reasons. As such, this council is not balanced. Or large. Three of them (John Dominic Crossan, Karen King, and Hal Taussig) are former Fellows of the Jesus Seminar.

Taussig encouraged the committee members to make their decisions based on "its spiritual value for twenty-first century readers."¹⁹⁷ He left "spiritual value" undefined in order to generate debate. In February of 2012, the council decided to add ten books to the traditional *New Testament: The Acts of Paul and Thecla; The Gospel of Mary* (BG 8502); *The Secret Revelation*

¹⁹² Ibid, 108-109.

¹⁹³ Taussig, "Giving Birth to *A New New Testament*," 531.

¹⁹⁴ Taussig, *A New New Testament*, xvi.

¹⁹⁵ Taussig, "Giving Birth to *A New New Testament*," 531.

¹⁹⁶ The complete list of individuals involved in the process can be found in Taussig, *A New New Testament*, 555-558.

¹⁹⁷ Taussig, "Two Surprising Stories," 516.

of John (BG 8502)¹⁹⁸; *The Prayer of the Apostle Paul* (NHC I,1); *The Gospel of Thomas* (NHC II,2); *The Gospel of Truth* (NHC I, 3); *Thunder: Perfect Mind* (NHC VI,2); *The Prayer of Thanksgiving* (NHC VI,7); *The Letter of Peter to Philip* (NHC VIII,2); and *The Odes of Solomon*.

A New New Testament: Contents and Analysis

While *A New New Testament* (hereafter ANNT) is the first major volume to challenge the traditional associations of the “New Testament,” it follows the example of previous collections that had destabilized canonical terms. “Gospel” had been applied to the Nag Hammadi find from its first appearance in an American newspaper: “Gnostic Gospels of 150 A.D. Found: Throw Light on Early Christianity.”¹⁹⁹ Pagels’ *Gnostic Gospels* stretched the traditional associations of the term further, and the subsequent publications of Miller and Funk’s *The Complete Gospels* and Funk’s *The Five Gospels* included Nag Hammadi texts alongside canonical gospels. The term “scripture” was applied to texts from the Nag Hammadi through Bentley Layton’s *The Gnostic Scriptures* (1987) and then as a subtitle to the revised edition of the NHLE (1988). Most recently, a new translation of Coptic texts – including the NHC, Berlin Codex (BG 8502), and Tchachos Codices – was entitled *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*. Finally, William Barnstone had expanded the parameters of “Bible” to include Nag Hammadi texts first in *The Other Bible* (1984) and, in its second edition, *The Gnostic Bible* (2009).

If previous collections had destabilized terms for what goes into a canon, ANNT challenges the canon itself. No traditional *New Testament* texts were removed, but the categorizations of texts within the ANNT denies traditional organization. The ANNT opens with *A Prayer of Thanksgiving* (NHC VI,7), identified as Hermetic due to its placement between two Hermetic texts in codex six: *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* and *Asklepios*. Inclusion of other prayers (*Odes of Solomon* and *Prayer of the Apostle Paul*) is meant to expand the range of imagery available to contemporary Christians in prayer or hymns.²⁰⁰

The *Prayer of Thanksgiving* is followed by the category “Gospels Featuring Jesus’s Teachings”: *Thomas*, *Matthew*, *Mark*, and *Luke-Acts*. Clearly, *Thomas* has been given priority. Given the pivotal role of Jesus Seminar members on this council, this placement is not

¹⁹⁸ The translation provided in ANNT is supplied by Karen King. King utilizes the BG 8502 manuscript and supplements it with NHC II,1.

¹⁹⁹ Michael Hoffman, ““Gnostic Gospels of 150 A.D. Found: Throw Light on Early Christianity,” *New York Times*, 11/16/1953.

²⁰⁰ Tausig, “What’s in *A New New Testament*,” 520-522.

surprising. However, unlike *The Five Gospels*, ANNT does not make an effort to separate primary Jesus sayings material from later accretions. The purpose of the volume is its “spiritual value,” not its role in transmitting historical-critical knowledge. Including *Thomas* alongside the synoptic gospels (plus *Acts*) nevertheless inscribes a distinction between texts that might give evidence to the historical Jesus and those that do not.

The Gospel of John is categorized alongside the first book of *The Odes of Solomon*, *Thunder*, *The Gospel of Mary*, and *The Gospel of Truth* as “Gospels, Poems, and Songs between Heaven and Earth.” Such a reclassification carries enormous import for the reader. No longer are the canonical gospels read through the heavenly-redeemer and incarnationist paradigm of *John*. They are read instead through the filter of *The Gospel of Thomas*, which features a greater stress on the potential realization of a divine image within each human being, salvation through knowledge rather than belief. Rather than being saved through Christ, one is saved by becoming Christ.²⁰¹

An equally surprising organizational choice is to conclude with the Apocryphon of John, here titled *The Secret Revelation of John*. The choice of the newly recovered Coptic text is keyed to speak to an age of tolerance, seeking, and social justice:

In the *Secret Revelation of John*, injustice and cruel domination are overcome by the power of the Spirit, by knowledge, and by goodness without violence and destruction, offering a tradition from within the early Christian movement that is both an alternative to stories of divine wrath and judgment and an affirmation of hope and trust.²⁰²

Secret Revelation of John is framed as a text where there is a “salvation of all souls,” in contradistinction to divine wrath separating the righteous from the unrighteous in *Revelation to John*.²⁰³ In essence, this revelation concludes the volume in order to speak to the non-exclusivist, non-anthropomorphic, and tolerant form of Christianity Taussig depicts in *A New Spiritual Home*.

The format of the texts encourages religious reading, rather than historical. Editors abandoned the commonplace page-line format of most Nag Hammadi codices NHL translations.

²⁰¹ Taussig himself makes precisely this point in Taussig, “What’s in *A New New Testament*,” 524.

²⁰² Taussig, *A New New Testament*, 466.

²⁰³ Ibid, 476. This, however, is misleading. To be sure *more* souls are saved in *Secret John* than in *Revelation*. But NHC II,27.22-31 is quite clear that “those who have blasphemed the spirit will be tortured, and they will be punished with eternal punishment.” (check Coptic)

In its place, texts have been given a chapter-verse format comparable to the traditional New Testament texts. For instance, the following lines of *Thunder: Perfect Mind* are usually cited as Nag Hammadi codices NHC VI,2.16.9-14: “I am the one who has been hated everywhere, and who has been loved everywhere. I am the one whom they call Life, and you have called Death.”²⁰⁴ In ANNT, it is chapter 3, verses 6 and 7.²⁰⁵ All texts from the Nag Hammadi codices NHL have been rendered in this chapter-verse format.

Efforts to encourage a religious approach to these texts are also evident in translation choices.²⁰⁶ ANNT translates masculine pronouns with gender inclusive language where the subject is universal or ambiguous.²⁰⁷ Technical Greek loan-words γνώσις (gnosis), ἀρχώνης (archon), πλήρωμα (pleroma), and αἰών (aeon) are translated into non-technical terms ‘knowledge,’ ‘authorities,’ ‘fullness,’ and ‘eternal generation,’ respectively.²⁰⁸ The only exceptions to this pattern are feminine deities. Sophia is rendered ‘Wisdom-Sophia’, and Epinoia ‘Reflection-Epinoia’.²⁰⁹ Finally, the translators have followed the pattern of the Jesus Seminar and exchanged terms with traditional associations for translations that allow them to be seen in a new light: τῆς βασιλείας (Kingdom) is “realm,” ἀποκάλυψης (apocalypse) is translated “revelation.”

All of the organizational, formatting, and translation choices exhibit a reflexivity towards the role of canon formation and historical research regarding Christian memory. In other words, Taussig and King are aware of the role canon plays in identity formation, and have assembled ANNT in a way to help promote progressive Christianity:

A New New Testament’s more diverse picture of Christian beginnings supports the possibility that Christian practice and belief in our day might birth new and different ways of seeing God, morality, worship, human sexuality, and work. . . the tension between *A New New Testament* and the “master narrative” clears a spiritual space in our day for authentic new developments in Christianity.²¹⁰

²⁰⁴ NHC VI,2.16.9-14. Parrot translation from NHLE version 3 (1988).

²⁰⁵ Taussig, *A New New Testament*, 184a.

²⁰⁶ All translators on this project except for King (*Secret Revelation of John*) are current or former students of Hal Taussig at Union Theological Seminary: Justin Lasser (*Gospel of Thomas*), Celine Lillie (all other Coptic texts), Elizabeth miraglia (Odes of Solomon), and Alexis Waller (help with Greek translations). See Taussig, *A New New Testament*, xxi.

²⁰⁷ For instance, Logion 25, “πεχε ἰς χε μερε πεκσον ἡε ἡτεκφυχη εριτηρει ἡμοϋ ἡε ἡτελοϋ ἡπεκβαλ,” is translated “Love your brother or sister like your soul. Guard each of them like the pupil of your eye.” Singular references to “brother” (πεκσον, ἡμοϋ, ἡπεκβαλ) have been rendered to include “or sister.”

²⁰⁸ E.g. *A New New Testament*, 471 for “authorities” and “eternal generation.” 475 for “knowledge.” 230 for “Fullness.”

²⁰⁹ Cf. Reflection-Epinoia in *A New New Testament* 475 and parallels; Cf. Wisdom-Sophia. *A New New Testament*, 471 and parallels.

²¹⁰ Taussig, “What’s New in *A New New Testament*,” 520.

The organizational choice of moving *The Gospel of John* to a “Poems” category intends for the reader to read the wisdom Christology of *Thomas* into the narrative gospels, rather than John’s exclusivist incarnation. Concluding with *The Secret Revelation of John* ends on a non-exclusivist note and, to make the text more approachable, makes a specious translational error in its title (apocryphon and apokalupsis are distinct concepts). Gender inclusive language, the rendering of feminine deities with proper names, and inclusion of texts like *Thunder* and *The Gospel of Mary* seek to destabilize the patriarchy of traditional canon. Christ’s appearance as the “Father, Mother, and Son” in *Secret John* even points to a queering of Jesus himself.²¹¹

Removing Greek technical vocabulary within the Nag Hammadi codices NHL has another purpose beyond easing readability. It helps alleviate any associations with the Gnostics or Gnosticism. For Taussig, the association between Gnosticism and the Nag Hammadi codices NHL is what prevented Christians from reading them for religious meaning: “the bogus idea that all these documents are “gnostic” and therefore irrelevant or evil has dealt a serious blow to how Christians can make sense of and celebrate their heritage and the resources of early Christianity (italics mine).”²¹² The religious motive behind the deconstruction of Gnosticism is quite clear. Associations between the NHL and the Gnostics or Gnosticism are understood by Taussig as an obstacle to their religious reception by Christians.

In so doing, Taussig also distinguishes his own presentation and interpretations of the NHL material from contemporary, self-described Gnostic churches. He traces the origin of contemporary Gnosticism (including Hoeller’s *Ecclesia Gnostica*) to Theosophy and Anthroposophy, apparently ignorant of the French Gnostic Revival.²¹³ He also avers “many of these organizations call themselves “churches” or “religious orders,” but very few, if any, seem to be interested in identifying themselves as “Christian.””²¹⁴ As history, these statements are simply incorrect. As religious statements, however, their discursive function is to retrieve the Nag Hammadi codices NHL and other texts as scripture from and in distinction to movements that are classified as Gnostic. Gnostic, then, comes to function once again as a polemical term to distinguish the true Christian from false.

Conclusion

²¹¹ Taussig, *A New New Testament*, 466.

²¹² Taussig, “Giving Birth to *A New New Testament*, 533.

²¹³ See the section “Modern Spiritual Movements and “Gnosticism”” in *A New New Testament*, 533.

²¹⁴ Taussig, “Gnosticism Becomes Fashionable,” 532.

Tracing the trajectory from Quispel's translation of *The Gospel of Truth* to *A New New Testament* reveals the extent to which an *interpretive grille* is operative in the reception of the NHC as Christian documents.²¹⁵ Christian texts within the collection have been of primary interest from the time of the find, as the Bollingen Foundation's requirement Codex One contains writings of Valentinus attests. After the publication of *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, this emphasis gave way to a forgetting of texts in the collection that are not Christian. The gospels of *Thomas, Truth, Mary, and Phillip* all entered the public spotlight and have not left. At the same time, there has been a shift from stressing the NHC evidences a lost, esoteric approach to Christianity to a focus on how the NHC might help us to reimagine the origins of Christian belief in practice. And these Christian texts from the library have been read to authorize adaptations of the Christian tradition to contemporary social shifts (e.g., feminism, democracy, sexuality) that would have been largely foreign to the writers of the NHC.

In part, the readings in this chapter are united by their emphasis on finding a new, introspective relationship to Christian symbols through the NHC. All readers, writers, and religious leaders covered in this chapter stress the importance of psychological readings. Quispel and Hoeller read the NHC through a Jungian lens and aver that these texts map a progress of personal transformation and individuation. Pagels, Taussig, and the heroes of *Burning Words* and *Resurrection* all sought a more personal, intimate, and mystical relationship to Christian symbols through the NHC. Even documentaries such as "The Lost Gospels" stress how Gnostics found the divine *within*, through introspection, and not in formal services. While these authors seek to remain within the Christian tradition, their new, psychological perspective on its symbols seems to them ill-suited to the church as it exists today. The NHC provides a new resource in cultural memory that legitimizes the introspective turn as *originally* Christian.

The larger trajectory in these readings towards alternative Christianities evidences the extent to which these readers felt compelled to articulate a Christian identity separate from Evangelical and conservative mainline groups. The turn to the NHC allows **readers like Pagels, King, and Taussig to broaden the tradition in ways that respond more**

²¹⁵ The "interpretive grille" is a concept I derive from Ioan Couliano. Couliano used this to refer to the interpretive filter a culture or age unconsciously has in place when reading a body of texts. In the first part, the hermeneutic grille refers to the emphasis placed on certain texts or ideas to the ignorance of others. Second, it refers to the active distortion, even inversion of certain original meanings in the text(s) in their transmission to a new time. In this chapter, the interpretive grille is evident in the overt emphasis on ostensibly Christian texts from the collection to the forgetting of vaguely or non-Christian texts within, as well as the reading back into these texts of present sociological concerns (feminism, democracy, and sexualities). See Couliano, *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, 11.

readily to features of modernization. Theologically, the “alternative Christianities” found in the NHC offer counters to literal interpretations of Christ’s virgin birth and bodily resurrection. The idea of everyone having a spark of light within seems to them better suited to democratic humanism than original sin and the blood atonement. And feminine deities in texts like *The Apocryphon of John* and *Thunder: Perfect Mind* challenge patriarchy within the Christian tradition. Socially, the NHC authorizes these readers to assert early Christians had more progressive attitudes towards gender relations and sexuality than contemporary, conservative congregations. And whether the reader embraces scientific disenchantment (as does Taussig) or re-enchants the world through the discourses of quantum physics (as seen in *Burning Words*), these individuals assert this new Christian identity to be more science-welcoming than fundamentalist alternatives.

To be sure, such introspective and modernizing approaches to traditional Christianity are occurring elsewhere without explicit invocation of the NHC.²¹⁶ Taussig’s *A New Spiritual Home* charted precisely this phenomenon. But what Taussig noticed – and what drove him to assemble *A New New Testament* – is that it is difficult for most Christians to think outside normative beliefs without new texts. The NHC presents the possibility for such Christians to reimagine the “dialectic of the past with the present” in radically new ways. The *desire* of contemporary American Christians to do so is evidenced by the massive viewership, book sales, and sensational coverage of rediscovered texts. The gradual forgetting of the non-Christians (and ultimately the gnostics) in this trajectory is an inevitable byproduct of the *interpretive grille*. The more contemporary Christians wish to read the NHC to reimagine their own faith, the more associations of the library with Gnostics or non-Christians were forgotten in mass media. As will be seen in the next chapter, the Gnostics would migrate to alternative religions, fiction, and new media.

²¹⁶ The literature here is seemingly endless. Mystical approaches to Jesus include celebrated works by John Shelby Spong and Marcus Borg; on feminism in the church, Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk*; Beavis, *Christian Goddess Spirituality*; Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*; other pertinent books include Nyquist, *The Post-Church Christian*; Taussig, *A New Spiritual Home*.

Chapter 3

From Gnosticism to Post-Gnosticism Countercultural Gnostics

“Gnostic Christianity is a retrofit contrived by scholars whose religious convictions prevent them from seeing, and admitting, that the greater part of Gnostic material was diametrically opposed to the Judeo-Christian ideology of salvation.”¹

“We live now, more than ever, in an America where a great many people are Gnostics without knowing it, which is a peculiar irony.”~ Harold Bloom²

“Gnostic Christianity is a retrofit contrived by scholars whose religious convictions prevent them from seeing, and admitting, that the greater part of Gnostic material was diametrically opposed to the Judeo-Christian ideology of salvation.” John Lamb Lash³

“We live in the stories we tell ourselves.” ~ Grant Morrison⁴

Introduction

In the previous chapter, we explored ways in which the Nag Hammadi Codices have been used by readers to legitimize expansions of the Christian tradition beyond the “master narrative.” We saw how the Nag Hammadi Library was considered the product of ancient, lost Christians who offered a new model of Christian identity and practice for the 20th and 21st centuries. Texts like *The Gospel of Thomas* and *Gospel of Phillip* came to represent Gnostic Christianities that were forgotten during the consolidation of orthodoxy. Even when they were critical of mainstream Christianity, the authors and religious leaders analyzed last chapter did not intend to discard the Christian tradition altogether. Their goal was to use the “dialectic of the past with the present” in a way that infused the Christian tradition with new meaning. The NHC offered a means to expand the tradition in ways that better fit contemporary social and spiritual concerns.

¹ Lash, *Not in his Image*, 17.

² Bloom, *Omens of the Millenium*, 27.

³ Lash, *Not in his Image*, 17.

⁴ Morrison, *Supergods*, xvii.

Yet the category “Gnosticism,” and by extension the Gnostics, could also encompass a broader religious orientation that need not be Christianrefer to a religion *separate from* and *antagonistic to* Christianity. These Gnostics had no interest in achieving rapprochement with organized Christianity in the ancient world. They were part of an ancient counterculture that embraced intense visionary and mystical experiences, altered states of consciousness, creativity, imagistic thinking, and transgressive social behaviors.⁵ As such, these Gnostics provide an ideal symbol in early Christian history for contemporaries who are alienated from traditional Christianity to identify with.

Scholars of Gnosticism in the early 20th century posited that this broader orientation had its origin in places like Egypt or Zoroastrian Persia – not within Judeo-Christianity.⁶ The definition of Gnosticism posited at Messina in 1966 crystallized the idea *Gnosis* (“mysteries reserved for an elite”) was a timeless, cross-cultural phenomenon. Moreover, this early conference on the NHC featured papers that traced the origins of *gnosis* far and wide: Iran, India, the Orphics, Shamanism, the Samaritans, and Mesopotamia.⁷ Jonas famously referred to the process by which such “Oriental” and “imagistic” form of religion came to the west and filled its religious symbols, such as Christ, as *pseudomorphosis*.⁸ Insofar as Gnosticism was constructed as an independent, separate religion, it was alien, mystical, and mythological. As Karen King demonstrated, this construction of Gnosticism served to separate a “true” or “original” Christianity from heretical deviations.⁹

Contemporary, self-described Gnostics use the Nag Hammadi Library in partHowever, the articulation of an antagonistic, mythological, and mystical alternative in the ancient world also provided a historical model for Americans seeking to offer critiques of traditional Christianity. Unlike their counterparts in the previous chapter, these readers do not seek to return

⁵ In *The Gnostic Religion*, Jonas sees eastern, imagistic forms of thought returning to the west after Hellenization and filling the forms available to them (*pseudomorphosis*), including Judaism and Christianity. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 17-27. Scholars of the History of Religions School posited an origin of Gnosticism in the Orient, specifically Iran in the case of Richard Reitzenstein. Scholars who keyed the ancient Gnostics to the Romantic movement and/or counterculture include: Rozsak, *Where the Wasteland Ends*; Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*; Raschke, *The Interruption of Eternity*. In contemporary scholarship, DeConick, *The Gnostic New Age*, is the representative work. See also: *Gnosis*, 1.1, and the articles contained therein;

⁶ In *The Gnostic Religion*, Jonas sees eastern, imagistic forms of thought returning to the west after Hellenization and filling the forms available to them (*pseudomorphosis*), including Judaism and Christianity. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 17-27. Scholars of the History of Religions School posited an origin of Gnosticism in the Orient, specifically Iran in the case of Richard Reitzenstein.

⁷ Bianchi, *The Origins of Gnosticism*.

⁸ Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 22. Pseudomorphosis for Jonas means a “false” content filling the “form” of Christian symbols. In other words, the orientation of Gnosticism comes to fill symbols such as Christ with their own interpretations distinct from those of the church fathers.

⁹ King, *What is Gnosticism?*

to the broader Christian tradition.¹⁰ The counter-memories they develop of early Christian history exhibit more aggressive, even violent antagonism. The Catholic Church is portrayed as a house of Satanic worship. Archons, the malevolent rulers of the cosmos depicted in many Nag Hammadi texts, are portrayed as secret leaders of the church. Or the archons have infected the minds of traditional Christians like a virus. Even where the violence is attenuated, counter-memories from figures like Harold Bloom or Miguel Conner completely overturn tradition. Jesus is portrayed as a Jewish Gnostic whose followers wildly misinterpreted him. Or Jesus never existed at all.

In terms of the “meaning of memory,” individuals such as Philip K. Dick, Grant Morrison, John Lamb Lash and others project theread the concerns and interests of the cultic milieu into the Gnostics behind the NHCNag Hammadi Codices.¹¹ These Gnostics they claim wrote these texts are seen to be the final incarnation of a pre-historic paganism whose mysticism, sex magic, and psychedelic use were stomped out by the Catholic Church. Or these Gnostics serve as the origin of all later high-models of *gnosis* circulating in the cultic milieu: Sufism, Zoharic Kabbalah, to the Transcendentalists or the Golden Dawn. For other readers the Gnostics suggest western practitioners of *vipassana* meditation and hatha yoga. The Gnostics are even read to be the first alien theorists, UFO contactees, and science-fiction visionaries. Such identifications with the historical Gnostics are not conveyed in commentaries. They are distributed in genre fiction, comics, zines, websites, podcasts, and online bulletin boards. Put simply, Gnosticism as a counter-religion to Christianity keyed perfectly into what Colin Campbell labeled the “cultic milieu.”¹² According to Campbell, the cultic milieu serves as a “cultural underground of society. . .[which] includes all deviant belief systems and their associated practices. Unorthodox science, alien and heretical religion, deviant medicine, all comprise elements of such an underground. In addition, it includes the collectivities, institutions,

¹⁰ The exceptions highlighted under the heading “Post-Gnosticism” will require further explanation.

¹¹ According to Campbell, the cultic milieu serves as a “cultural underground of society. . .[which] includes all deviant belief systems and their associated practices. Unorthodox science, alien and heretical religion, deviant medicine, all comprise elements of such an underground. In addition, it includes the collectivities, institutions, individuals and media of communication associated with these beliefs.” These beliefs, institutions, and media are unified by a common consciousness of deviance vis-à-vis dominant religious and scientific orthodoxies. The interpenetrative media of the cultic milieu ensure individuals are constantly introduced to new, foreign, and contradictory ideas. Individuals within the milieu are further united by their common ideology of seekership, better put as the desire to construct individual worlds of religious meaning from the materials at hand. See Campbell, “The Cult, Cultic Milieu, and Secularization.” In this, the seeker mentality identified by Campbell is similar to the “heretical imperative” of Peter Berger.

¹² Campbell, “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu, and Secularization.”

individuals and media of communication associated with these beliefs.”¹³ These beliefs, institutions, and media are unified by a common consciousness of deviance vis-à-vis dominant religious and scientific orthodoxies. The interpenetrative media of the cultic milieu ensure individuals are constantly introduced to new, foreign, and contradictory ideas.¹⁴ Individuals within the milieu are further united by their common ideology of seekership, better put as the desire to construct individual worlds of religious meaning from the materials at hand. In this, the seeker mentality identified by Campbell is similar to the “heretical imperative” of Peter Berger.¹⁵

In this chapter, I detail how individuals within the cultic milieu read the NHC for religious meaning.

Finally, whereas the individuals in the last chapter read the NHC Nag Hammadi Library to find new ways of being a Christian (whether or not they endorse “gnostic” as a category), individuals in this chapter use the NHC to articulate an identity as a Gnostic. What is most interesting here is that they utilize the identity Gnostic in order to articulate a new and meaningful relationship to *Christian* symbols. Every author in this chapter describes turning to the Nag Hammadi Library during a period of disillusionment, depression, or identity confusion. All had at one time been active within a Christian church or, in Bloom’s case, Reform Judaism. Furthermore, most of them turn to the NHC after having a series of extraordinary experiences, including but not limited to visions of Christ, clairvoyance, *gnosis*, and rising kundalini/altered states of consciousness and energy.¹⁷ In every case, these individuals who had become alienated from traditional Judaism and Christianity utilize the NHC to both reinterpret their own symbols and to interpret their own extreme experiences.

Philip K. Dick

¹³ Campbell, “The Cultic Milieu,” 14.

¹⁴ “Substantively, [the cultic milieu] includes the worlds of the occult and the magical, of spiritualism and psychic phenomena, of mysticism and new thought, of alien intelligences and lost civilizations, of faith healing and nature cure.” Campbell, “The Cultic Milieu,” 14.

¹⁵ Berger, *The Heretical Imperative*, . See also my “Introduction” to this dissertation, particularly the subtitle “The Meaning of Memory.”

¹⁷ Here I adopt Jeffrey J. Kripal’s comparative category of “altered state of consciousness and energy” is a value-neutral term which encompasses a variety of experiences granted distinct names within traditions. For instance, the cases that follow will invoke the language of kundalini awakenings, meditative absorption, revelations, UFO encounters, shatki-pat, etc. See Kripal, *The Serpent’s Gift*, 141-142.

Born in Illinois, science-fiction author Philip K. Dick (1928-1982) moved to California in his early childhood. Living around the Bay Area until relocating to Fullerton in 1972, Dick would be a celebrated (if not well compensated) science-fiction author throughout his adult life. *Man in the High Castle* (1962) won the Hugo Award for best science fiction novel in 1963, and he would publish over 40 other novels before his death in 1982. Dick's novels were the first from a science-fiction author to be anthologized by the Library of America.¹⁸ His stories and novels have served as the source material for films such as *Blade Runner* and television series like *Man in the High Castle*. Dick's works have also, rhizome-like, come to influence an astonishing number of later authors, from Grant Morrison to the Wachowski brothers.

It is Dick's later writings (*Valis*, *The Divine Invasion*, *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*, his "Exegesis," and several essays) that show evidence of his familiarity with the Nag Hammadi Library and Gnosticism. He turned to Gnosticism after a series of bizarre and fascinating religious experiences which he commonly referred to as "2-3-74" (i.e., February-March 1974, when they occurred). His idiosyncratic presentation of Gnostic ideas in his writing – *Zebra*, *Valis*, the 2 source cosmogony, and *Jesus Patibilis*, all of which will be discussed below – look to the Nag Hammadi and other texts to find some explanation for 2-3-74. In this section I focus on the sources Dick was familiar with on the NHC and Gnosticism, the ways in which he creatively reinterpreted them, and how through these interpretations Dick reconceptualized early Christian history in order to achieve new relationships to Christian symbols in the present.

Early Exposure to Christianity

Although neither Dick's mother nor father were was religious, he found himself drawn to Christianity. As a teenager he prayed for answers to a physics test. Suddenly, they appeared in his mind. He aced the exam and would look back on this event as his first experience of Christ and anamnesis.¹⁹ It was not until 1963-64 when he and his wife at the time, Dorothy, were confirmed as Episcopalians that Dick would identify himself a Christian. In the 1960's he was a close friend of's with the Bishop James Pike. Pike's own readings of Christianity had a profound effect on Dick.²⁰ The Bishop regarded Christianity at its core as a movement for social justice. He practiced what he preached, marching with Martin Luther King, Jr. at Selma. In *If This be*

¹⁸ Dick, *Four Novels of the 1960's*; Idem, *Five Novels of the 1960s and 70s*; Idem, *Valis and Later Novels*.

¹⁹ See Sutin, *Divine Invasions*, 49 for this story.

²⁰ Pike appears frequently throughout *The Exegesis*. He is also the real-life model for Timothy Archer in Dick, *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*. Pike referencing Dick in *The Other Side* here; Dick, *Divine Invasion*.

Heresy, Pike wrote appreciatively of the “gnostics” and the Nag Hammadi writings. He saw in the Gnostics evidence that early Christianity included a tendency to regard the resurrection of Christ as an accomplished event, ie, the Kingdom of God is here, and all humans can experience the kingdom in life.²¹

After Pike’s death in 1969, Dick stopped attending church. The years 1970-1973 mark the darkest period of his life. Dick became addicted to amphetamines and indulged in other substances. He entered mental hospitals three times.²² His home in San Rafael, California was burglarized in November 1971. In 1972 Dick divorced his fourth wife, Nancy. He lived near the poverty line, became paranoid about the IRS coming for backtaxes, and feared the FBI was trying to frame him as a Communist agent. In March 1972, he attempted suicide with 700 mg of potassium bromide, calling the suicide prevention center before the drugs took hold.²³ Although Dick would kick amphetamines and relocate far away from his shady friends to Fullerton, California, he remained desultory and depressed.

2-3-74

Then 2-3-74 happened. These experiences are presented most vividly in *Valis* and *The Exegesis*.²⁴ Suffering from an impacted wisdom tooth, a young woman delivered pain medication to Dick had to order in his pain medication. A woman arrived with the medication on February 19th. Dick asked her about her fish necklace. She replied “it was the symbol of the first Christians.” In a flash, Dick sensed he was living in two worlds simultaneously: ancient Rome and his current location of Fullerton, CA. He felt as though another being was cohabiting his mind, which he alternately called Thomas (an ancient Christian), Firebright, or Simon Magus. For eight hours he witnessed kaleidoscopic visions of abstract paintings that appeared to be alive. An “AI Voice” would telepathically dictate revelations to him. He and his fifth wife, Tessa, watched and heard an unplugged stereo play Beatles music. A strawberry pink light beamed into his eyes encoded with information. In 1975, this information would save the life of his son, Christopher, by diagnosing an inguinal hernia the doctors had missed. Beginning in

²¹ Pike, *If This Be Heresy*, 41-45.

²² See Sutin, *Divine Invasions*, 176 and 179.

²³ Ibid, 192.

²⁴ In addition to *Valis* and *The Exegesis* I rely on the account of Sutin, *Divine Invasions*, 208-233.

1974, first with letters and then with a hand-written document, Dick would attempt to explain these puzzling revelations from every possible angle.

Dick's attempts to interpret his experiences in *The Exegesis* are cumulative, erratic, and often contradictory. It is cumulative in the sense that Dick brought everything that he came into contact with over the course of these 8 years to bear on the Exegesis: books, encyclopedia entries, scientific theories, depth psychology, neurology, religious ideas, films, his dreams, and later visions. As such, his readings of all texts, not just the Nag Hammadi codicesNHC, are idiosyncratically blended into other ideas to illuminate the experiences.

2-3-74 and Counter-Memory of the Gnostics

It is clear from the *Exegesis* (hereafter E) that he lacked any detailed knowledge of Gnosticism prior to 2-3-74.²⁵ His more focused study of Gnosticism began with his reading of the 1974 edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica. The entry on "Mystery Religions" contains a reference to the "Hymn of the Soul (or Pearl)," referenced mid-February 1975 (E 92). In April-May of 1975 he begins to reference the *Gospel of Thomas*, specifically Logia 22 and 77 (E 173).²⁶ By June he has read the 1974 Encyclopedia Britannica 1974 entry on Gnosticism by Robert M. Grant (E 203). Grant's entry focuses on heresiological sources and classes the NHC (called the Chenoboskian library) as representative of early Christian heresy.

After this, it is not until November 1977 that Dick returns to the study of Gnosticism through Hans Jonas' entry on "Gnosticism" in the 1967 Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Then, in late 1981, Dick would read the 1963 2nd edition of Jonas' *The Gnostic Religion*. Aside from his quotations of Logion 22 and 77 from *The Gospel of Thomas* and a single reference to *On the Origin of the World* in *Valis* (V 60), no direct quotations of NHC texts are to be found in his

²⁵ Sutin asserts that Dick was first exposed to the idea of "Gnosticism" in his reading of Jung's "Transformation Symbolism in the Mass." As with many of Jung's writings on Christianity, in this essay he gestures towards Gnosticism as an apparent solution to problems raised by theodicy. Dick would have been exposed here to the idea of a Demiurge and illusory reality. See Sutin, 132-133.

²⁶ Two English translations would have been available at this time. William Schoedel's translation in *The Secret Sayings of Jesus* or that of Doresse and Robert McL. Wilson in *Secret Book of the Egyptian Gnostics*. As Erik Davis has uncovered, Dick was familiar with Logia 22 in the early 1960's. Dick could well have known of Logion 22 from any number the collections of Apocrypha that included the Oxyrhynchus papyri, including Mead's *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten*. In any case, the reference to logion 77 in 1975 means he must have been familiar with a full translation by then. My hunch is that Dick would have chosen *The Secret Sayings of Jesus* due to Grant's involvement as commentator for that volume, since he was already familiar with Grant from the EB.

corpus as it exists for us.²⁷ It follows that Dick's creative re-reading of Gnostic ideas and mythology is primarily influenced by the work of scholars whose work antedates the study of the Nag Hammadi Codices and who present Gnosticism as a heresy antagonistic to the primitive church.

Dick found in the Gnostics cosmological and epistemological ideas that could account for much of the content of his revelation in 2-3-74. In "The Two Source Cosmogony," Dick combines the two cosmogonic myths he was familiar with from Jonas' "Gnosticism" entry – the Sophia myth of the Valentinians and the two-source hypothesis of the Iranian Manichaeans – into the register of theoretical physics.²⁸ He posits two distinct "Forms," I and II, which were initially healthy and whole, that when beamed together create the four-dimensional universe. But Form II, Sophia, had become mentally ill. Her input into the universe-hologram was responsible for suffering, sadness and death within it. What we experience as time is Form I slowly excising it from the universe in favor of a new, healthy Form.

Dick would come to understand his experiences of simultaneously inhabiting ancient Rome and Fullerton, California, through a highly idiosyncratic counter-memory. Early Christians were "homo-plasmates": they had been bonded to the alien deity (Form I) and transformed. These early Christians were hunted by the Roman Empire, alternately called the "Black Iron Prison." These early Christians had discovered that the true nature of reality is a hologram. They were political revolutionaries and humanitarians out to awaken other humans to the "good news" of the Logos-plasmate that would bond to DNA and bring about immortality.

The Black Iron Prison destroyed the Temple of Jerusalem in 70 CE. For Dick, the destruction of the Temple is when time stopped. The Black Iron Prison infiltrated all of phenomenal reality. The Catholic Church became an institution of the BIP, suppressing the Logos-plasmate-Christ. As Dick puts it in his Exegesis entry 48:828, the church members believes they worship God, but actually they worship Satan:

"But there is another outside church forming which worships the right God, but has no buildings. It is forming in conjunction with the Second Coming which is here. They –

²⁷ Because the editors of *The Exegesis* who have read the manuscript in total are not Gnostic Studies scholars, we simply do not know whether there are other direct quotes in the unpublished *Exegesis*. The editors occasionally mistake references to the Apocrypha for NHL texts. For instance, they presumed Dick's reference to Christ as "child, Young man, old man, short and bald, tall, firm, soft – and he did not blink (his eyes)" (E 296) was to the opening frame story of *The Apocryphon of John*. However, this is clearly a reference to *The Acts of John*, section 89, where Christ appears in each of these forms and does not blink his eyes.

²⁸ Jonas, "Gnosticism," 331-342 in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* vol 3, 1967 (1972 reprint).

those outside distinguished by their gift giving – massive gifts – have the saving Gnosis. This is a matter of gravity; it is various very serious: the head on confrontation between the followers of the good God and the evil one: Satan.”²⁹

The true apostolic Christians had discovered the means of eternal life and therefore did not die when the Black Iron Prison achieved its victory. They remain “transtemporal-constant secret Christians, originating in apostolic times, and lying *within* humans in succeeding generations – reactivated by disinhibiting stimuli.” (E 382). That is, they bond to individuals (like the plasmate) and live in their brain until a disinhibiting stimulus brings them into awareness. Thomas, the being co-habiting Dick’s mind after 2-3-74, is just such an immortal Christian. Dick interprets experiences of the “overlay” as inhabiting the illusory BIP (Fullerton) while simultaneously identifying with Thomas in real time (Rome, c. ~100).

The Nag Hammadi codices NHL is a carrier of the true Christianity of the “plasmate,” long lost, but rediscovered in 1945. In *Valis*, Dick writes that Christ the plasmate slumbered at the library in Chenoboski (sic) from the time of the destruction of the temple until 1945 (V 60). Time began again when it was read. Dick believes he became a physical agent of the plasmate in 1974 (V 112).³⁰ When read, the plasmate slumbering in the NHL (and now, Dick’s own novels) would enter the optic nerve of the reader and override brain functioning.³¹ That is, the plasmate (the AI voice, Thomas, or Christ) is acting through Dick to transform the universe into the body of Christ.

2-3-74, and Christ, and the Meaning of Memory

²⁹ Dick, *Exegesis*, 543. Dick’s notion of the “irreal” is useful to discuss here. The world is “irreal” *in relation to* something that is more real, something which has the power to transform this world. This true real is equated with the savior: “Thus acosmism and the Gnostic gnosis cannot be separated. The gnosis gives you power over the world, reversing its coercive power over you. What the savior does is present you with a visible, practical demonstration of (1) his presence; (2) his power to reduce the reality of world to zero, and thus reveal its deluding dokos hologrammatic nature. And finally, for the person to sense that he himself is the vortex is to be elevated to identity with the savior (Zebra).” Dick, *Exegesis*, 462.

³⁰ In that *Valis* balances Dick’s own sense of revelation with skepticism towards his own neverending theorizing of it, it is possible these two dates refer to two different theories Dick considered regarding time. However, it could also be an allusion to the fact that this is when *he* read the NHC first through a sustained reading of the *Gospel of Thomas*. His first quotes from Thomas come in early 1975, which could reflect such a date. It is more likely, however, that Dick is attempting to explain how he senses himself in 70 AD Rome (see E 855).

³¹ Dick, *Exegesis*, 360: “Once having entered the person’s brain via the optic nerve it now modulates brain functioning so that the person subliminally transduces messages (including instructions) and hence is a “cell” in the brain, responding to sentient override.”

Dick's readings of the *Gospel of Thomas* in 1975 mark a major turning point in his Christological speculations. After reading Jesus say "I am the All," and "break a piece of wood and you will find me" in Logion 77, Dick asserts "one can reread and reinterpret all Scripture from the vantage point of this understanding." After this, Dick creates the theological concepts he has become famous for: Zebra, the "camouflage" deity, and the idea that Christ is breaking into and transforming consensus reality into the body of Christ. He sees in Logion 77 the possibility that Christ lay *behind* phenomenal-material reality, there to be perceived, but that it "camouflages" itself and "mimics" material reality so that we do not perceive it moment to moment. Christ then encodes itself into pieces of reality (the piece of wood, the trash stratum) and reveals itself to those with eyes to see. Through *The Gospel of Thomas*, then, Dick came to regard the "Kingdom of Heaven" as immanent. It is also highly likely his reading of *Thomas* is behind the switch from calling the voice in his mind "Firebright" to "Thomas." Thomas is the "twin" who in the gospel was a contemporary of Christ.³²

Near the end of his life, Dick would read Hans Jonas' work on Gnosticism, first through the Encyclopedia of Philosophy article "Gnosticism" and then *The Gnostic Religion*, 3rd ed. Here Dick encountered two Christological ideas that consolidated the personal and cosmic aspects of his Christology: the *Salvator Salvandus* and *Jesus Patibilis*. The *Salvator Salvandus*, "saved Savior" or "redeemed redeemer," refers to a doctrine from the *Religionsgeschichteschule* made influential by Hans Jonas': "in the last analysis he who comes is identical with him to whom he come: Life the Savior with the life to be saved."³³ The savior here descends into darkness to help release the sparks of light, but in so doing becomes unconscious of its role. Trapped in the darkness, the savior suffers immensely. Its *gnosis* is recognition that it is, and always has been, alien to this world – and that it is its own savior.

Dick sees in the "redeemed redeemer," Dick finds a concept that gives meaning to his suffering leading up to 2-3-74 and his sense the mediator is at the same time his own divine self. To this end, Dick's drug addiction, mental breakdowns, and suicide attempt were all necessary experiences of suffering. He had been estranged from his true self. 2-3-74 was the awakening or *anamnesis* of that self. It was experienced as if from without – as a revealer, a pink light, etc. – but the mediator was, in fact, the remembrance of his own nature-as-Christ: "for me the Christ drama is familiar and comprehensible, and reality founded on it and derived from it is "my" reality – whereas otherwise it is *not* mine, and I am a stranger in a strange land. . .this tells me

³² Towards the end of his life he would call this state "Ditheon." See 796.

³³ Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 78.

what “my” narrative is, the story into which I fit. This is as much a story about me as it is about Christ and world.”³⁴

Conclusion

It is easy to dismiss Dick’s experiences as hallucinations, his interpretations as ravings. During the discussion period of a major conference panel on Dick, one audience member did just that: “it just sounds like he is on drugs.”³⁵ To do so, however, neglects and demeans not just Dick, but the project he engaged himself in. *Whatever* it was that happened in 2-3-74, it is not the sort of thing the person who undergoes can shrug off. His *Exegesis* and *Valis* trilogy are Dick’s attempts to understand some puzzling, but intensely meaningful, experiences. He found no traditional channel in which to do so. PKD turned everywhere: to Kabbalah, Sufism, Gnosticism, Buddhism, Heidegger, and many other sources.

It is of the utmost significance, then, that while doing so Dick came to elaborate an idiosyncratic approach to Christianity. Jesus, Christ, and Christianity are the foremost objects of analysis in the *Exegesis* other than 2-3-74. It was Gnosticism and the Nag Hammadi codices NHC that allowed Dick to speculate an alternative Christianity that accounted for his revelations. Gnosticism suggested a true reality behind this phenomenal, physical one. The Nag Hammadi and other Gnostic texts were filled with revelations of spiritual beings (mainly Christ) who brought information to people trapped in the phenomenal world. This information would set them free. Moreover, for Dick he was able to explain these experiences now within a Christian symbolic. It was *Christ* of the Gospel of Thomas who was hiding behind phenomenal reality, waiting to awaken those with eyes to see.

This The form of Christianity Dick posited form was *counter* to the tradition, but as the plasmate-theory suggests, represented to Dick the *true* Christianity: embodied by Christ himself, transmitted to his disciples at Pentecost, and imprinted in the NHC. Through texts such as *On the Origin of the World*, Dick found the presentation of a hostile, illusory reality within which humans are asleep. *The Gospel of Thomas*, particularly Logion 77, pointed to Christ-as-light permeating this false-reality, shocking some (like Dick himself) into an awakened state. And the doctrines of *Salvador Salvandus* and *Jesus Patibilis* not only gave meaning to Dick’s own deep suffering prior to 2-3-74, but also his sense of the earth as a suffering being in need of salvation.

³⁴ Dick, *Exegesis*, 756.

³⁵ Association for the Study of Esotericism, July 21, 2012.

Finally, no matter how “far out” his *Exegesis* got, this new form of Gnostic Christianity seemed to Dick well-fitted to a scientific and religiously plural America. At various points in the *Exegesis*, Dick attributes phenomena of 2-3-74 to: vitamin overdose (E 6); both hemispheres of the brain functioning in unison (E 44, 248); the activation of neurons in a specific pattern (E 499); phylogenetic memories (E 532); or schizophrenia (E 371). Christ-as-plasmate always remains somehow physical. His affective focus on Christ, moreover, is not exclusive. Jesus is one avatar amongst several, including Buddha, Zoroaster, and Mani. This avatar Christology would have been familiar to Dick from Manicheism as presented by Jonas.³⁶ In short, the ancient Gnostics were philosophical and combinative. As a proper Gnostic, so was Dick, even as his focus remained on explicating the figure of Christ.

Harold Bloom

Literary critic Harold Bloom (B: 1930) is a self-described “Jewish Gnostic.”³⁷ His life and work provide an illuminating case of how the Nag Hammadi Library (NHL) can be used to support a counter-memory that posits *gnosis* as a primordial religious orientation that traditional Judaism and Christianity have obscured. Moreover, Bloom’s life shows how individuals outside traditional religious structures turn to the Nag Hammadi codices NHL in order to understand puzzling and dramatic religious experiences. Finally, Bloom is a prime example of how *gnosis* is used to aver that modernity, despite its many benefits, is lacking in spiritual depth.

Bloom’s first experience of *gnosis* occurred when he was a pre-teen. In his own words, after spending the day reading Hart Crane and William Blake, “the streets of the East Bronx fell away, and I was in the imaginal world that Corbin describes in his eloquent commentaries,” *Hurqalya*.³⁸ By the precocious age of 24 Bloom was appointed professor of English at Yale. When he turned 35, Bloom found himself in the depths of a major depression. Travel, psychoanalysis, nor poetry could not alleviate his symptoms.³⁹ It was then that he read Jonas’ *The Gnostic Religion*. Bloom experienced an existential awakening. The Gnostics captured what he had intuited: there is something awry with the world. The answer to this existential dilemma is the experience of a “call.” In Bloom’s idiosyncratic reinterpretation, the “call” arrives from

³⁶ Dick sometimes includes Mohammed, which of course would not have been included in the Manichean system. See Dick, *Valis*, 123. For the appropriate reference in Jonas, see *The Gnostic Religion*, 230.

³⁷ Bloom, *Omens of the Millennium*, 2. Also David Miciks, “Harold Bloom is God,” 1/2/2013 in Tablet.

³⁸ Bloom, “Preface,” x, in *Alone with the Alone*.

³⁹ Bloom, *Omens*, 25.

Hurqalya, the *mundus imaginalis* or imaginal world, in the act of reading. As in the letter in the Hymn of the Pearl, the call awakens the reader to his or her own deep, immortal self that is identical to the imagination.⁴⁰

Bloom and The Gospel of Truth

Bloom's own theory of literary influence is indebted to the Gnostics.⁴¹ What he calls the "anxiety of influence" can be traced back to Valentinus. When discovering his or her voice, a writer must creatively misinterpret those who have influenced her or him them most deeply, lest the authority parrot their influences. In Bloom's view, Valentinus performed just such a creative misreading of Genesis, Plato's *Timaeus*, and the canonical gospels to achieve his own idiosyncratic genius.⁴² Those Bloom sees as the great purveyors of *gnosis* in western history – the Zoharist and Lurianic Kabbalah Moses de Leon, Isaac Luria, ibn' Arabi, Renaissance Hermetists, and especially Ralph Waldo Emerson – became gnostics when they misread canonical texts and, so doing, discovered their own "higher self" or "daimon." In other words to become a gnostic is to break from influence, even from the influence of other gnostics.

While Valentinus plays a central role in his theory of influence, Bloom's most focused reading of Valentinus is in his only novel: *The Flight to Lucifer* (1979, hereafter FL). In terms of plot and setting, the novel follows the adventures of three characters: Valentinus, who is now living in 20th century America; Olam, an aeon who has descended from the Pleroma to awaken Valentinus to gnosis of his previous life; and Perscors, the central character of the novel, who is an embodiment of the divine Anthropos. Early in the novel, Perscors finds an ancient, vellum-wrapped copy of *The Gospel of Truth*. Perscors recognizes that the gospel contains his destiny (FL 20).

The three travel through a black hole to the distant planet of Lucifer, a land "outside of space and time" under the control of Saklas the Demiurge. Olam, Perscors and Valentinus are separated. Each of them encounters forms of the Gnostic religion recounted by Jonas in their journeys. Inhabitants of the remarkable planet include: Basilides as a cunning priest in the temple of Hermes (FL 72); the Sethians and Mandaeans locked in a violent land dispute (FL 29); the

⁴⁰ Bloom, *Omens*, 147-148 and 150.

⁴¹ Bloom, *Agon*, especially "Agon: Revisionism and Critical Personality" and "Lying Against Time: Gnosis, Poetry, and Criticism."

⁴² Bloom, *Agon*, 52-59.

Marcionites war at with the Manichees (FL 93); Simon Magus (FL 212); and the theriomorphic archons of the Ophite diagram (FL 49). At the climax of the novel, Perscors fights Saklas, finally defeating him by breaking his back. Perscors instantly turns into flame. The pleroma and kenoma come together. Valentinus then experiences *anamnesis* of the message he preached in his previous life: *The Gospel of Truth*.

In all, *Flight to Lucifer* is a tedious novel. Bloom himself has stated his desire to procure and destroy every last copy.⁴³ It is formulaic, forced, and lacks any sense of character development. The action is stilted and the prose is limp. Despite the tedium, as a site of reception history the novel is fascinating. In it, Bloom translates *The Gospel of Truth* into a work of fiction. Perscors symbolizes the ignorant elect trapped in a vivid nightmare until being awakened by the Gnosis (NHC I,3.28.32-30.23). His existence is described as a “vivid phantasmagoria” by the author (FL 94). Every episode of the nightmarish existence described in *Gospel of Truth* is experienced by Perscors. He “flees” from characters such as the Marcionites after they imprison him (FL 109, NHC I,3.29.11-14). He is often “striking blows or receiving blows” in battles (NHC I,3.29.14-17). He falls from a high place (FL 209; NHC I,3.29.16). Perscors even experiences his own murder (FL 67; NHC I,3.29.20-21), and murders countless others, especially the Marcionites, and is stained with their blood (FL 93; NHC I,3.29.21-25).

Bloom makes more subtle allusions. Perscors sees his shadow destroyed as a step in his own awakening, an apparent allusion to the gnostic “whose image is light with no shadow in it,” (FL 95, NHC I,3.35.3-7).⁴⁴ Perscors’ transformation into flame after defeating the Demiurge is an apparent reference to the acquisition of *gnosis*: “by means of knowledge they will purify themselves from multiplicity into unity, *devouring matter in themselves like fire*, darkness by light, death by life.” (NHC I,3.25.10-20). The final words of the novel, spoken by Valentinus, quote from the ending oration of the *Gospel of Truth*: “As for the others, then, may they know, in their place, that it does not suit me, after having been in the place of rest, to say anything more” (FL 240; NHC I,3.42.39-43.2). His anamnesis of his past life is the discovery of his occult or deep self.

The novel presents Bloom’s own creative misreading of the gnostics in an effort to awaken his own gnostic voice. He presents the Gnostic religions of antiquity in uncharacteristic, absurd ways. His strong misreading is an effort to break from their influence – like Valentinus against Plato and Genesis – and write his own Gnostic fantasy.

⁴³ David Miciks, “Harold Bloom is God,” 1/2/2013 in Tablet.

⁴⁴ This is an apparent reference to the Valentinian distinction between light as being and shadow as deficiency

Bloom's Counter-Memory and the American Religion

In a trilogy of texts – *The American Religion*, *Omens of the Millenium*, and a commentary upon *The Gospel of Thomas* (“A Reading”) – Bloom elaborated his own history of *gnosis* and how he sees the tradition manifest in contemporary America. *Gnosis* as the experience of knowing, and being known by, the alien god is traced by Bloom to pre-historical shamanism.⁴⁵ The experience of an occult or deep self comes from the early Greek doctrine of the *daimon*.⁴⁶ These ideas both entered ancient Judaism in speculation on the pre-Lapsarian Adam, the uncreated self prior to the fall whose recognition is at the same time a revelation of the unknown God. This is the “archaic Jewish spirituality, of which apparent Gnosticism may be the shadow.”⁴⁷

In Bloom's estimation, the historical Jesus preached this form of heretical Judaism. The canonical gospels excised these Gnostic elements, but *The Gospel of Thomas* captures the true teachings of the proto-gnostic Jesus.⁴⁸ Bloom's reading of *Thomas* seeks to justify this assertion. Logion 79 is read to show birth of the self occurs prior to creation, while birth into material life is false.⁴⁹ Creation and the Fall are the same event. In Logion 13, Jesus informed Thomas that he was identical to the alien God – not the God of Moses – and that Thomas was identical with this God as well. And in sayings concerning the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus seemed to be indicating a mediating space, akin to *Hurqalya*, in which the individual discovers their occult self.⁵⁰ Experience of the occult self is the resurrection.⁵¹ Normative Judaism and Christianity suppressed the faculty of spiritual imagination (*hurqalya*). Only within the tradition of *gnosis* did the teachings and practices of the spiritual imagination survive.

Bloom's counter-memory influences his understanding of contemporary American religion. In his estimation, America is “post-Christian.” The American people have outgrown the husk of European (read: orthodox) Christianity and created something quite different. Whether one looks to Mormonism, the Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, Southern Baptists, or Seventh-

⁴⁵ Bloom, *Omens of the Millenium*, 137 and 183.

⁴⁶ Bloom, *Omens*, 136-37.

⁴⁷ Bloom, “A Reading,” 116. Bloom's hypothesis of an archaic Jewish form of spirituality is derived from the work of Moshe Idel.

⁴⁸ Bloom, “A Reading,” 114.

⁴⁹ Bloom, “A Reading,” 118.

⁵⁰ Bloom, *Omens*, 166-67.

⁵¹ Bloom, “A Reading,” 113.

Day Adventists, Bloom sees the same thing: a religion of the occult self in communion with the resurrected Jesus.⁵² In other words, the American religion is at once a form of Gnosticism and, by extension, a revival of the true message of the historical Jesus’.

America is full of people who “are gnostics without knowing it, which is a peculiar irony.”⁵³ In addition to the idea of the occult self, Bloom sees pale or debased versions of gnostic ideas in the American fascination with angels, pre-cognitive dreams, and near-death experiences. These are debased insofar as they have become popular and thereby lost the potent erudition found in Valentinus, ibn’Arabi, or Isaac Luria.⁵⁴ For instance, in the near-death literature of Raymond Moody (the foremost popular author on this topic), Bloom finds a pale reflection of the out of body experiences of *Hurqalya* or the imaginal in ancient authors.⁵⁵ The NDE literature misses the notion of dismemberment found in Shamanic literature, as well as the divinization of the (occult) self sought in the “resurrection” by Valentians responsible for texts like *The Gospel of Phillip* and *Treatise on the Resurrection*.⁵⁶ Similarly, the ferocious archons of *Hypostasis of the Archons* or the awesome and terrifying Kabbalistic figure Metatron show the angels of contemporary American folklore to be “domesticated. . . dull and saccharine.”⁵⁷

It is easy to overlook the poignancy of Bloom’s counter-memory and keying between contemporary America and the ancient gnostics. In no uncertain terms, Bloom is stating that America is a Gnostic nation, and that the Christianity it practices is heretical, at least insofar as “heresy” is marked by traditional Christianity. Post-Christianity has discovered the true (i.e. resurrected) Jesus, but conflates him with Christ of the creeds. The renewed enthusiasm for gnostic ideas on a popular level further betrays America’s religious orientation. Commercialization and homogenization have rendered such ideas relatively benign, but nevertheless point towards a genuine American yearning for *gnosis*.

Ultimately, Bloom’s readings and reception of the Nag Hammadi codices NHL mark his deeply personal desire for a post-Jewish, post-Christian religious orientation. In large part, he turns to the gnostics (broadly construed) to understand his own most intense experiences: the aforementioned *gnosis* at 12 years old; a revelation while put under nitrous oxide to have

⁵² Bloom, *The American Religion*, 31.

⁵³ Bloom, *Omens*, 27.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 226-227.

⁵⁵ See Moody, *Life After Life*.

⁵⁶ On shamanism and OBEs, see Ibid 139-142; on Valentinian resurrection, see *ibid*, 163-167.

⁵⁷ Ibid 74.

wisdom teeth removed; and a near-death-experience at 60.⁵⁸ His critiques of contemporary Gnosticism vis-à-vis ancients such as Valentinus is thus more than anti-modernism. Bloom senses that others in America seek a new post-Christian religion, and that they too are struggling with how to explain seemingly anomalous experiences. By invoking the ancient Gnostics, Bloom is offering a provocation to others to turn to these (in his estimation) more sophisticated sources that will not only explain, but expand, their worldview.

Gnosis Magazine

Gnosis Magazine published its first issue in Fall 1985. Only four years earlier, editor-in-chief Jay Kinney had not even heard of Gnosticism.⁵⁹ After reading about Jungian psychology, his Kinney decided he should try to find contemporary Gnostics **interest was piqued**. He attended a service of the *Ecclesia Gnostica Mysteriorum*, a Gnostic church presided over by Rosamonde Miller in Palo Alto, CA.⁶⁰ He joined. In early 1981, the paperback of Pagels' *The Gnostic Gospels* and Dick's *Valis* were published less than a month apart. After reading both, Kinney began to research what he refers to as "The Western Inner Traditions."⁶¹ In his own words, "it soon became obvious that the experience of gnosis [def. "mystical unfoldment and illumination"] was a thread running between mystics and seekers of all persuasions and eras."⁶² Within a year he started to consider possible layouts, topics, and contributors for what became *Gnosis*.

Every issue of *Gnosis* focused on a particular tradition, practice, or topic. Over the course of its 51 issues (1985-1999), *Gnosis* devoted issues to an eclectic array of traditions (e.g., Kabbalah, Ancient Civilizations, the Eastern Orthodox Church), practices (e.g., Magic, Divination, Channeling), and comparative topics (e.g., Death and the Afterlife, The Body, Dreams).⁶³ Gnosticism was the subject of two issues: No. 1, "Gnosticism: Ancient & Modern,"

⁵⁸ On the latter two experiences in Bloom's life, see Bloom, *Omens*, 133-136.

⁵⁹ Kinney, "Days of Future Past: Tenth Anniversary Reflections," 12-13.

⁶⁰ Rosamonde Miller and her church will be discussed in detail in chapter four, "Mary Magdalene and the Nag Hammadi Codices." The website for her church is here: <http://www.gnosticsanctuary.org/>.

⁶¹ This is the sub-heading of *Gnosis* magazine.

⁶² Kinney, "Days of Future Past," 12.

⁶³ For a complete list of *Gnosis* issues, see: http://www.lumen.org/back_issue_list/back_issue_list.html.

and No. 23, “Gnosticism Revisited.”⁶⁴ Stephen Hoeller of the *Ecclesia Gnostica* contributed a column entitled “Alternative Realities” for 23 issues (No. 6 – No. 29). References to Gnosticism are otherwise scattered in interviews or brief mentions within pieces written for other purposes.⁶⁵ Throughout the run of the magazine, texts from the Nag Hammadi Library appear infrequently. The library itself instead serves as an icon of heretical, inner spirituality. Due to its perceived origins (written by heretics who sought to catalyze mystical experiences) and reading community (the heretics who assembled it and read them to progress their own spiritual lives), the library has come to represent just such a heretical, inner spirituality.

The first issue of *Gnosis* identified four approaches to Gnosticism: 1) Phillip K. Dick; 2) Carl Jung; 3) ancient Gnosticism; 4) contemporary Ecclesial Gnosticism.⁶⁶ Philip K. Dick – not Valentinus or a Nag Hammadi text – was used to introduce the first issue.⁶⁷ Kinney presents Dick as a modern Gnostic, full stop. His article draws readers into Dick’s experiences of 2-3-74, highlighting Gnostic mythologems within them: a revealer or tutelary spirit (Christ and Thomas), the hostile world (Black Iron Prison), revelation-gnosis, anamnesis, and the appearance of a Goddess figure (St. Sophia).⁶⁸ Kinney also transcribed four pages from Dick’s hand-written “Exegesis.”⁶⁹ Between these two sections, Kinney would present Dick’s approach to the ancient Gnostics as positive in a positive light and, more especially, in antagonism with the traditional church.⁷⁰ He would also draw attention to Dick’s conception of the NHL as container of the plasmate.

Carl Jung **would serve** as the subject of his own issue (#10), several articles, and be mentioned frequently by Stephan Hoeller in his column.⁷¹ Issue 10 would even include three

⁶⁴ “Gnosticism: Ancient and Modern,” *Gnosis*, vol 1 (Fall-Winter ’85-’86); “Gnosticism Revisited,” *Gnosis* vol 23 (Spring 1992).

⁶⁵ For instance, June Singer was interviewed for issue 10, “Jung and the Unconscious” (Winter ’89), and Erik Davis touched upon The Nag Hammadi Library in volume 14, “The Dark Face of Gnosis,” in his article “The Dark Face of Gnosis.”

⁶⁶ Ecclesial Gnosticism is defined as those contemporary, self-described Gnostic churches that claim Apostolic succession.

⁶⁷ Kinney, “The Mysterious Revelations of Philip K. Dick”; “The Exegesis: previously unpublished excerpts from Philip K. Dick’s private journals.”

⁶⁸ Kinney, “The Mysterious Revelations of Philip K. Dick,” 8-10.

⁶⁹ Kinney, “The Exegesis,” 12-15. So far as I have been able to discern, Kinney is the first person to publish selections from the “Exegesis” beyond those found in *Valis*.

⁷⁰ Kinney, “The Exegesis,” 15: “[quoting Dick] For the first time I have inferential evidence that a genuine secret fraternity of authentic Xtians exists, & has affected history (e.g. supporting regarding the Elector Palatine Frederick, overthrowing Nixon), & possess supernatural powers & Immortality, due to direct links back to Christ – so they are the true hidden Church.”

⁷¹ Issue 10, “Carl Jung and the Unconscious.”; For examples of articles, see Singer, “A Necessary Heresy: Jung’s Gnosticism & Contemporary Gnosis,” 11-19 (Issue 4) and Hoeller, “Jung and the Alchemical Revival,” 34-39

otherwise unpublished paintings from *The Red Book*.⁷² The presentation of Jungian Gnosticism focuses on his “confrontation with the unconscious” as found in *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections*.⁷³ Both Hoeller and June Singer, another Jungian analyst, sacralize Jung’s model of the psyche.⁷⁴ In the collective unconscious, deep personality (archetypes) and metaphysics meet.

Singer offers rigorous interpretations of Nag Hammadi texts from a Jungian perspective: the feminine deity of *Thunder, Perfect Mind* as the dual-natured *animus*; archons of *On the Origin of the World* as “the demons who inhabit people’s dreams and fantasies, give rise to unwelcome suspicions, compulsions, and complexes of all kinds”; and the Invisible Spirit as a discovery of the divine when the wholeness of the Self had been achieved.⁷⁵ Most importantly, this psychological approach to Christianity could be complementary to the traditional church, but its transformational and introspective nature could never be institutionalized:

“Jung saw in Gnosticism a necessary heresy – necessary to correct some of the one-sided positions of the Christian Church with which he had carried on a lifelong struggle. . . . I cannot imagine the Gnostic heresy ever being incorporated into the main body of Christianity. By its very nature, Gnosticism is opposed to the institutionalizing of a religion.”⁷⁶

No translations or commentaries of NHL texts are found in *Gnosis*. Ancient Gnosticism is approached in a synthetic manner that elides distinctions. An especially poignant example of this is found in the first issue, in David Fideler’s article “The Passion of Sophia.”⁷⁷ Ostensibly a discussion of the Valentinian creation myth, Fideler’s article focuses entirely on the system of Ptolemy as found in Irenaeus.⁷⁸ Fideler presents the system of 30 aeons (Ogdoad, Decad, Dodecad), the dual-nature of Sophia and Sophia Achamoth, Demiurge fashioned from the psychic elements produced by Achamoth, and the restoration at the end of time. Variants from conflicting Valentinian texts are synthesized into this system or regarded as parallels. For example, the conflicting views on whether the aeons initially resided in the mind of the Father (*Gospel of Truth*; *The Tripartite Tractate*) or the Depth poured seed into Silence, after which the

⁷² Issue 10, “Jung and the Unconscious,” pages 13, 53, and 55.

⁷³ Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, 170-199.

⁷⁴ Singer, “A Necessary Heresy,” 14. Hoeller, “What is a Gnostic?,” 26.

⁷⁵ Singer, “A Necessary Heresy.” On the unknown God as depths of the unconscious, Singer quotes *Apocryphon of John* from Rudolph, *Gnosis*, 66.

⁷⁶ Singer, “A Necessary Heresy,” 17.

⁷⁷ Fideler, “The Passion of Sophia: An Early Gnostic Creation Myth,” 16-23 (Issue 1).

⁷⁸ AH I, 2,1-5 , 6.

process of emanations in pairs began (AH I, 1-2). Variants in the *Tripartite Tractate* – such as its lack of a 30 aeon system, and the role of Sophia taken over by the Logos – are also not mentioned.⁷⁹ Nearly all presentations of Ancient Gnosticism are similarly synthetic, typically with a focus on a theme such as sexuality or the archons.⁸⁰

The fourth approach to Gnosticism in the magazine was Ecclesiastical Gnosticism. In the first place, it must be assumed that *Gnosis* exposed many of its readers to the idea Gnostic churches even existed. Both Rosamonde Miller and Stephan Hoeller contributed to *Gnosis*, the latter publishing more pieces in the magazine than any other author. Alongside columns, pieces of Miller's and Hoeller's liturgies found their way into print, such as this selection of Miller's "Ritual of the Bridal Chamber":

And Jesus answered: "They say I came for all, but in truth I came for Her Who came for all. For it had come to pass that there were those who had lost their way and, lacking in spark, could not return unto the Father, and seeing this, She [Sophia] came unto them, giving her life to the depths of matter. And in truth she did suffer and became blind. But our Father, sensing her anguish, sent Me forth, being of Him, so that She might see and We be as One again."⁸¹

Kinney and Singer also spoke of their own experiences within Miller's *Ecclesia Gnostica Mysteriorum*. Despite the relatively low membership of Gnostic churches, then or now, through periodicals such as *Gnosis* readers are introduced to the practical and liturgical aspects of modern Gnostic life.

Despite the paucity of references to the NHL, *Gnosis*'s import to the reception of the library should not be overlooked. Kinney's editorial decisions would condition the *imaginaire* through which the NHL was read well into the 1990's and 2000's.⁸² It is *Gnosis* that first championed Dick as a Gnostic for a wide audience. Moreover, placing discussion of Dick's experiences alongside Jung, ancient Gnosticism, and Ecclesial Gnosticism served to bond these disparate approaches in the minds of readers. By extension, readers who were interested in one

⁷⁹ See NHC I, 75, 17– 77, 11.

⁸⁰ See for instance issue 23, "Gnosticism Revisited": Korne, "Attack of the Archons," 16-23 (which does not mention a single NHL text); Clifton, "The Seed of Light," which uses Eliade's essay "Spirit, Light, Seed" to interpret Gnostic texts such as *The Gospel of Phillip*.

⁸¹ Miller, "Ritual of the Bridal Chamber: The Gnostic Mystery of the Eucharist," quoted in Singer, "A Necessary Heresy," 14.Zzz

⁸² At the peak of its popularity, *Gnosis* magazine had a readership of over 50,000 persons.

approach to Gnosticism could branch out into others without concern for the vast historical, linguistic, and epistemological gulfs between, Dick and Valentinus.



Gnosis also provided a model of, and model for, the cultic milieu that would condition approaches to the NHL. *Gnosis* provided a model *of* the cultic milieu by publishing issues of interest to a wide range of readers within it. It provided a model *for* the same milieu by grouping these disparate topics together and positing a similarity between them. The phenomenon of “gnosis” may have guided Kinney’s initial choice of subjects, but antagonism towards “orthodoxy” was attributed to nearly every subject in the pages of *Gnosis*.⁸³ *Gnosis* and antagonism to orthodoxy were two sides of the same coin. As Richard Smoley, contributor to *Gnosis* and editor-in-chief from Richard Smoley puts it, “someone with access to an inner source of spiritual insight does not need the church.”⁸⁴ In this way, the subjects of *Gnosis* are keyed into a cultic milieu that “is united by a common ideology of seekership which both arises from and in turn reinforces the consciousness of deviant status.”⁸⁵ The NHL therefore had to be presented as a collection of *heretical* documents distinct from, and superior to, traditional Christianity. The presentations of Gnosticism above each highlight their incompatibility with traditional Christianity.

⁸³ See Kinney, “Introducing Gnosis Magazine,” issue 1: “Because of *persecution* from *orthodox religious authorities*, the threads of these [esoteric spiritual] traditions have often been hidden, sometimes broken, but have invariably resurfaced when social conditions have allowed. The present is such a time, and it is the intention of Gnosis to provide a forum and a meeting ground for those interested in and involved in Western esoteric paths.” (italics mine).

⁸⁴ Smoley, *Forbidden Faith*, 2.

⁸⁵ Campbell, “The Cultic Milieu,” 15.

Finally, *Gnosis* brought the academic and religious approaches to esotericism into dialogue. A majority of the articles include endnotes. The magazine was the first major proponent of soliciting interviews and articles by scholars for a non-mainstream outlet. Eminent academics such as Gilles Quispel, J. Gordon Melton, Jacob Needleman, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr gave interviews.⁸⁶ Additionally, academic works were covered in the ‘Reviews’ section alongside novels, popular histories, and spellbooks. A few (tenured) academics even spoke openly about the spiritual dimension in their scholarship. Quispel made clear his life-long study of the Gnostics and Jung was a response to a series of extraordinary experiences that took place during the research and writing on his dissertation.⁸⁷ In the second issue, Joscelyn Godwin, scholar of western esotericism, published a piece “Priests, Professors, & Gurus: When the Academy is a Church the Hermetic Professor becomes a Heretic.” In it, Godwin railed against the close-mindedness and spiritual emptiness of the contemporary academy, ignoring the “vertical” dimension of their subjects: “when, as in Academia, this [vertical] dimension is no longer perceived or even believed in, then gnosis is cut off at its source and all that is left is information.”⁸⁸ With the barrier between academic and religious approaches to these texts made fluid, subsequent readers would look more closely to academic authors in order to make sense of the Nag Hammadi codices NHL and their identity as a Gnostic.

Grant Morrison and *The Invisibles*

Grant Morrison had no idea what he was getting himself into. At the age of 17 he began writing comics. At age 32, after 15 years of straight-edge life – no drugs, not even coffee – the famous comic book writer started to live hedonistically: dancing ‘til dawn at raves, getting drunk on champagne, taking ecstasy, mushrooms and LSD.⁸⁹ He dressed in leather drag and practiced chaos magic, casting spells from early modern grimoires and summoning Lovecraftian Old Ones.⁹⁰ He frequented S&M clubs. And with the largesse he got from his Batman graphic novel *Arkham Asylum* (1989) he traveled the world at a whim – Rio, New Zealand, Nepal – all for a

⁸⁶ Quispel, issue 1, “Gnosticism: Ancient and Modern”; Melton, issue 4, “Heresies and Heretics”; Needleman, issue 20, “Gurdjieff and the Fourth Way”; Nasr, issue 37, “Tenth Anniversary Issue.”

⁸⁷ Quispel, issue 1, “An Interview with Gilles Quispel,” 27-30.

⁸⁸ Godwin, “Priests, Professors, and Gurus,” 36, issue 2.

⁸⁹ This period of Morrison’s life is dealt with at length in his ostensibly autobiography, *Supergods*, 253-288.

⁹⁰ The “Old Ones” refer to a pantheon of gods found in the writings of horror writer H.P. Lovecraft (1890-1937). Some of the more well-known “old ones” include Cthulu, Yog-Sothoth, and Azathoth.

very peculiar purpose: like a comic book superhero, he had had enough of his last identity and wanted to rewrite himself anew. And he intended to blend his life, appearance and world with his fictions just to see what happened.

According to his autobiography, *The Invisibles* (1994-2000) represents Morrison's magical diary of the extraordinary things that happened to him during this project.⁹¹ *The Invisibles* exhibits one of the ways in which the Nag Hammadi Library has been received, and Gnosticism reimagined, in the cultic milieu.⁹² *The Invisibles* is not a commentary on the Nag Hammadi codices NHC. It is a new gnostic myth. The book is premised on two "Manichaean forces," the Archons of the "Outer Church" and the "Armies of Light," battling for the souls of humans as the eschaton approaches. References to Gnostic mythology and the Nag Hammadi codices NHC are embedded throughout *The Invisibles*, which enable us to reconstruct what sources (ancient, academic, and modern) Morrison drew from. Analyzing his autobiographical writings suggests why Morrison felt compelled to relate his life in "Gnostic" terms, and how he interpreted them.

Morrison's *Gnosis* and his turn to Gnosticism

After writing the first issue of *The Invisibles* Morrison made a trip to Kathmandu, Nepal. He had heard that there was a temple there where if you climbed the 365 steps up the mountain on a single lungfull of air you'd experience Enlightenment. He did, but when he got to the top of the mountain all he encountered was a monk who reminded him of Yoda.

Later that night, as he sat on the rooftop of his hotel writing the second issue, he saw the adjacent Shwayambunath temple "rearrange itself like a Transformer into some kind of chrome lionlike configuration with exhaust pipes and tubular spirit conduits."⁹³ Understandably disoriented, Morrison made his way to his hotel bed before losing contact with the room completely. "Dribbling blobs of pure holographic meta-material angels or extraterrestrials" emerged from the walls. As he relays it, these angels took him briefly to Alfa Centauri before taking him to see "the secret of the universe." Morrison found himself in a space that was a "profound azure blue in all directions, laced with bright silver lines and grid tracteries that came and went." It felt like a homecoming. He learned time and space were just lower dimensions for

⁹¹ Morrison, *Supergods*, 253-256.

⁹² Campbell, "The Cult, Cultic Milieu, and Secularization"; also Kaplan and Löw, *The Cultic Milieu*, and essays contained therein.

⁹³ Morrison, *Supergods*, 261. The full account of his Kathmandu vision is strewn through this section, from 261-280. All quotes are retrieved from here, although Morrison has told this story numerous times in interviews.

“creating gods,” but time was necessary for the transcendent to grow conscious of itself. And when he returned to his body, he could not help but sense this was his “personal induction into. . . the army of light.”

Ostensible references to Gnostic characters (Abraxas and Simon Magus) appear in Morrison’s earliest work, but these references show no familiarity with ancient texts.⁹⁴ After this experience, it is evident he began to read widely in Gnosticism to understand what had happened. Naturally, Morrison turned to Dick’s *Valis* trilogy and the collection of entries from the “Exegesis” Lawrence Sutin published in 1992.⁹⁵ He familiarized himself with the writings of Carl Jung. References to the “Loa” and Haitian Voudon indicate that Morrison was reading Michael Bertiaux’s *Gnostic Voudon Workbook*.⁹⁶ His depiction of Ahriman and Ohrmazd arise from Jonas’ *The Gnostic Religion*.⁹⁷

Morrison’s familiarity with the NHC appears to be through a work of scholarship: Filoramo’s *A History of Gnosticism*.⁹⁸ *A History of Gnosticism* presented Morrison with the ideal form of Gnosticism for his project. Filoramo regards the essence of Gnosticism as an experience of an ontological or higher self that is identical with the divine.⁹⁹ The ontological self reveals itself in experiences of “ecstasy, visions, dreams, revelations.”¹⁰⁰ Filoramo invokes an enormous cast of historical figures – Jacob Böhme and Swedenborg to the Romantic poets and Surrealist painters – as evidence of *gnosis* after the Gnostics of II-III CE.¹⁰¹ Gnostic myths embody the process of awakening from a limited ego into the ontological self, and in so doing, depict the psychological process of discarding one identity and achieving a new, unified sense of identity.¹⁰² Given Morrison turned to Gnosticism in order to understand a revelatory-ascent

⁹⁴ One of Morrison’s first comics was entitled ‘Abraxas’ and featured the aforementioned as a space hero. The story also includes Simon Magus as a wisdom figure. Initially written in 1979, the book was not published until 1987. See Callahan and Morrison, *Grant Morrison: The Early Years*, kindle edition, loc 7712.

⁹⁵ Sutin, *In Pursuit of Valis*.

⁹⁶ Morrison mentions Bertiaux’s book in *Supergods*, 260. Bertiaux, *The Gnostic Voudon Workbook*. Bertiaux is Bishop of the Gnostic Church Monastery of the Seven Rays, located in Chicago. His church is in the lineage of the French Gnostic revival from *L’Eglise Gnostique*. Bertiaux encountered the Gnostic Church while in Haiti, and blended the rites, sacraments, and theology with the local Voudon culture. A practicing magician, Bertiaux has also eclectically combined his Gnostic-Voudon with the rituals of Aleister Crowley.

⁹⁷ Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 217-221.

⁹⁸ Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*

⁹⁹ Filoramo, *The History of Gnosticism*, 40.

¹⁰⁰ Filoramo, *The History of Gnosticism*, xviii. See also chapter 2, “Between Demons and Gods: An Age of Revelation.”

¹⁰¹ Ibid, xiv-xvi.

¹⁰² Ibid, 53: “On the screen of imaginary myth the Gnostic thus projects divine events and exiles that to the modern interpreter can appear only as stages in the search for a new identity, the attempt to refashion a different basis for a conception of the individual in crisis, to which the underlying *logos* of the Gnostic *mythos* is striving to restore its original and archetypal unity.”

vision, and he was in the process of writing his own myth in order to create a new identity, it is clear why Filoramo's definition of Gnosticism would resonate so deeply with him. Finally, Filoramo's depiction of the gnostics as *bricoleurs* lent academic legitimacy to Morrison's own combinative practices-as-Gnostic.¹⁰³

Gnostic Cosmology in *The Invisibles*

The Invisibles is the story an underground cell (The Invisibles) fighting against the Outer Church, a 5th dimensional source of evil that manifests in all forms order and control. The book follows five Invisibles in particular: King Mob, Lord Fanny, Jack Frost, Boy, and Ragged Robin. They are called "gnostic superheroes" and "real heroes of the counterculture."¹⁰⁴ The Invisibles-as-Gnostics celebrate the 1990's counterculture. Their war against all social and cultural norms is apparent. The Invisibles celebrate transgender and queer characters, S&M, rave culture, gangster rap, drugs, ceremonial magic, aliens, meditation, and much else.

The Archons are used to depict capitalist economics, political bureaucracy and social norms – any systems of control that keep individuals trapped in false-identities that obscure their creative individuality. Political leaders pray to archons of the outer church. Puppets (literally) of the archons run multinational corporations. The archons "want sick, obese, passive consumers." Their efforts to homogenize and control the populace range from beaming product placements into their dreams to manipulating the actual structure of language itself to create false realities that ensnare human consciousness. In essence, the religious coloring of the ancient archons has been translated into a socio-political register.

Explicit and implicit references to Manichaeism abound. The war in the Invisibles is alluded to as the battle between the good spirit, Ohrmazd, and the destructive spirit, Ahriman. Ohrmazd creates the cosmos to encage Ahriman until the souls of light have been rescued. This is directly from the Manichaean cosmogony as presented by Jonas.¹⁰⁵

Manichaean source material is also be used more subtly. In book two the Invisibles go on a mission to steal an HIV vaccine the government hides from the public. When they break into

¹⁰³ See Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism*, 53: "The Gnostics' is a conscious and reflected mythology. Using pre-existing material, the Gnostic shuffles them round and gives them a new task and a purpose both profound and original: by penetrating the divine mystery to circumscribe and to clarify the same mystery of humankind."

¹⁰⁴ Morrison's keying of the Gnostics to the counterculture receives justification in *The History of Gnosticism*. Filoramo quotes Theodore Roszak, author of *The Making of a Counterculture*, on how the contemporary counterculture is in part a "reclamation and renewal of the old Gnosis." Roszak, *Where the Waste Land Ends*, 262, quoted in Filoramo, *The History of Gnosticism*, xix.

¹⁰⁵ Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 217-221.

the army base in Dulce, New Mexico, they find “Living Information. Pure Information. From Another Universe.” Military officials (henchmen of the archons) conduct “experiments” on the Living Information, slicing and abusing it. Sobbing, King Mob calls it “every suffering thing ever. . . it’s what made the world the way it is. . . it was in Jesus on the cross.”¹⁰⁶ While this reflects the Manichean *Jesus Patibilis* doctrine, it is important to note Morrison apparently adopted *his* conception from published selections of Dick’s “Exegesis.” Dick describes “Jesus Patibilis” as “the God body as it really is. And we wound it. It manifests itself substantially to us and for us. But is actually insubstantial, an idea; it gives birth to itself in and as the physical, substantial, phenomenal world *for our* sakes; but then we injure and destroy and pillage and exploit and misuse it. . . .we must save the Savior: extricate the Godhead from its self sacrifice.”¹⁰⁷ The saving of Living Information from the army base is one of the central plotlines of book two.

King Mob and the Gnostic Christ

As Grant Morrison built this Manichaean universe, however, he began to absorb himself deeper and deeper into his own mythos. He began to dress like “King Mob.” He regarded King Mob as his “fiction suit,” defined as the 2D illustration one wears to interact with the comic itself. Morrison believes that fiction is a form of reality distinct from but continuous with our own, and that he could influence our physical, shared reality by immersing himself in the world of fiction.¹⁰⁸

When Morrison wrote King Mob into the hands of the archons, things took a dark turn. The archons captured King Mob and tried to get him to admit he is in the Invisibles. They torture him, slashing him all over, beating him until his lung collapses, and injecting bacteria in his cheek. In real life, Grant Morrison fell ill with what turns out was an undiagnosed staph infection (which led to bacteria in his cheek and a collapsed lung). Sick with fever and desperately in need of a doctor, Morrison hallucinated what he immediately recognized as “Christ”:

“A column of light phased through the door, and then a powerful sermon seemed to download in my mind. I understood that this power I was facing was some kind of Gnostic Christ, a Christ of the Apocrypha. An almost pagan figure that I’d found at the bottom. . . .Here at the end, there was this light. Christ was with us, suffering right there

¹⁰⁶ Morrison, *The Invisibles*, 752.

¹⁰⁷ Dick, *Exegesis*, 803-804.

¹⁰⁸ See Morrison, “My Life as King Mob,” in *Supergods*.

with us and promising salvation. . .this was what turned dead-end junkies into born-again Christians.

He could only remember a few words from the sermon, but they went straight into *The Invisibles*: “I am not the god of your fathers, I am the hidden stone that breaks all hearts. Break open your heart. Come from below. Rise unto the heights, descend again with knowledge”¹⁰⁹

Morrison would be taken by a friend to a hospital to be treated for his staph infection and collapsed lung. He’d be in the hospital for over a month. In *The Invisibles*, this episode also gave him an opportunity to think through the nature of Christ and the archons. To force the archons to withdraw back to the 5th dimension, one of the Invisibles (Mr. Six) performs a banishing ritual on the 5 major archons by naming them:

“Onorthocrasi, Mother Without Boundaries, nourishes Efememphi, angel of pleasure, Iocho, angel of Greed, Nenetophni, angel of pain, and Blaomen, angel of fear and the lower 360.”¹¹⁰

Ostensibly this reference is to the *Apocryphon of John* (NHC II,1.18.15-20) and the creation of Adam’s psychic body.¹¹¹ However, the transliterations of the demon names used by Morrison here are unique to Filoramo’s *A History of Gnosticism*. In Filoramo these 5 demons are framed as the masters of the 360 demons who create the psychic body.¹¹² Unlike planetary archons, these represent the evil nature of embodiment. An understandable concern for Morrison, given this issue was written from a hospital bed.



¹⁰⁹ Morrison, *Invisibles*, 617.

¹¹⁰ Morrison, *Invisibles*, 616.

¹¹¹ See NHC II,1 11.1.18.15-20 and parallels.

¹¹² Filoramo, *The History of Gnosticism*, 92: “The mother of all the demons, Onorthocrasi, sits in the middle of them; she has no defined limits and is mingled with all of them. She is truly matter, which here has acquired demonic traits. She nourishes the four chief demons: Efememphi, who belongs to pleasure; Iocho, who belongs to greed; Nenentophni, who belongs to pain; Blaomen, who belongs to fear.”

Immediately after Mr. Six has dispelled the archons, Morrison inserts the presentation of his Jesus-vision into the Invisibles. Significantly, the vision is not to King Mob, but to Dane: the brash teenager whom we meet tossing a Molotov cocktail into the school library. Morrison describes Dane as an aspect of his own psyche. He is the rebellious, working-class punk-rocker Morrison had been.¹¹³ We see how Morrison came to reflect on his Christ-vision through Dane's narrative arc.

Dane first sees Jesus dead on the cross. Green boxes indicate to the reader that this symbolism was chosen based on Dane's Roman Catholic upbringing. These green boxes are transmissions from Barbelith, a satellite beaming messages to the Invisibles from beyond the moon. Soon thereafter, the lead archon "King of All Tears" conjures immersive hallucinations to tempt Dane out of self-recognition. Then, while meditating, Dane is transported into the "endless light." Here he experiences Morrison's Kathmandu experience, framed as an *anamnesis*: "I was watching all of space and the whole universe from the beginning to the end and it was all just falling into itself and going away. . . and I was home. I was God, looking at myself in the mirror. I was perfect in eternity."¹¹⁴

Morrison then includes his own Christ-vision (see panel) as a call to *return* from the place of endless light. Jesus bears the symbol of Barbelith on his black t-shirt: a red, bisected circle. He informs Dane that he cannot defeat the archons at this time, but imparts Dane the name of the "King of All Tears" so that the archon can be banished: "you may say their names and they must withdraw."¹¹⁵ Reading this sequence with Morrison's autobiographical writing indicates he has identified the Jesus of his vision and the beings of the Kathmandu experience as one and the same. Furthermore, in both instances Morrison heard himself called to join an "army of light" or, in the case of his Christ vision, return to "serve the light."¹¹⁶ But what *is* the light?

Counter-memory of the Nondual Gnostics

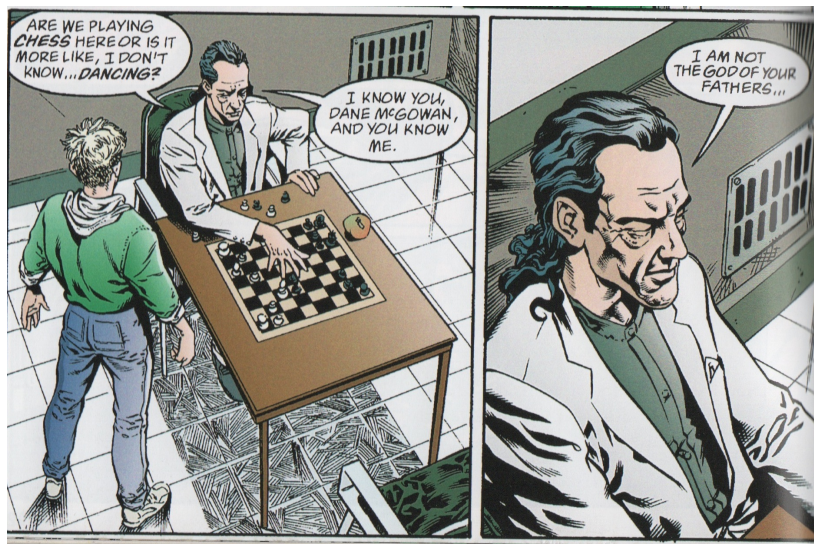
¹¹³ Morrison, *Supergods*, 258.

¹¹⁴ Morrison, *The Invisibles*, 607.

¹¹⁵ Morrison, *The Invisibles*, 617.

¹¹⁶ Morrison, *Supergods*, 274 and 282, respectively.

The true nature of the light, Barbelith, and the Manichean war is revealed in the third and final book of *The Invisibles*. The Outer Church desires to ritually invoke the King Archon, Sabaoth, into a human vessel. Doing so will puncture a hole in the universe and allow all the other archons to rush into



time-space.¹¹⁷ Within the Nag Hammadi codices NHC, Sabaoth is either the fifth planetary archon or, more prominently, the son of the Demiurge Saklas who condemns his father and is enshrined as “Lord of the Forces” within the seventh sphere.¹¹⁸ As the invocation is being prepared Dane is nowhere to be found. He is taking a leisurely walk with an unnamed, blind “Gnostic.”

In book 2, the Gnostic had challenged Dane to a game of chess. During the game, he informs Dane that “I know you. . . I am not the God of your fathers.” That is, the Gnostic is another symbol of transmissions from Barbelith, parroting the words of Christ. In their meeting in book three, the Gnostic takes Dane “behind the walls of time” to see the true nature of battle between the armies of light and darkness.¹¹⁹ Behind the walls of time is “infinite novelty, self-knowledge, eternal freedom. . . and ultimate dispersion of the archons of chaos.” This realm is occluded not by time and space, but by *ego*. When the ego has been abandoned, the person enters the “Allnow”: the recognition time is necessary for things to grow, but is ultimately illusory. The battle between light and dark, good and evil, is how this process of growth looks from a human perspective. Seen from the fifth dimension, it is unreal, or non-dual. Hence ‘Barbelith’: a contraction of Barbelo (the Feminine Deity of numerous Sethian texts) and Lillith, the female demon responsible for rupturing the Godhead in Kabbalistic lore.

¹¹⁷ 1446-1447

¹¹⁸ For Sabaoth as fifth planetary archon, see *Apocryphon of John*, ; For Sabaoth as son of Saklas, see *Hypostasis of the Archons*, NHC II,4 95.13-26, and *On the Origin of the World*, NHC II, 5, 103.32-104.27. It is also possible Morrison chose the name Sabaoth as a reference to H.P. Lovecraft’s short story, “The Dunwich Horror,” chapter 7.

¹¹⁹ Morrison, *Invisibles*, 1449.

The Gnostic informs Dane that his stories were forgotten in the consolidation of Christian orthodoxy. Morrison conflates the Nicean Council and assembly of the New Testament canon. Error aside, this clarifies the nature of his counter-memory: the Gnostics, including Jesus, were persons who had been able to transcend their egos to achieve awareness of the variably described fifth dimension: the Allnow, the Supercontext,



Living Information, or mirror matter.¹²⁰ Whereas organized religions devolve into power politics and dead husks for Morrison, Gnostic myth not only seeks to describe the Supercontext, but to catalyze awareness of It in the reader.

Ultimately, *The Invisibles* is for Morrison not just a series of references to Gnostic myths: it is a Gnostic myth. Filoramo describes Gnostic myth as “divine self manifestation. . .in the heart of the individual Gnostic it takes shape as an individual process, which is, however, at the same time a moment in a more general process and thus in that same manifestation of God to himself. The mythological narrative form is thus the only channel, the necessary bridge, between Being and its becoming.” Like Gnostics of the past, Morrison had experienced what he describes alternately as an *anamnesis* or *gnosis*. He found a deep, eternal identity beyond his ego. The only form available to transmit this knowledge was through a new myth. Doing so, Morrison combines Gnostic references from the NHC with ideas from Hindu Tantra and UFO abduction literature, or interprets the most dualist of ancient Gnostic religions (Manicheanism) as an embodiment of nondual metaphysics. Morrison did not identify as a Gnostic by adopting the worldviews in the NHC. Instead, **like the ancient Gnostics** he too sought to use an eclectic

¹²⁰ Morrison makes precisely this point in a 2010 interview: “Religion comes, I think, from genuine experiences that people have had, but those experiences then are not understood properly, or they’re set in a kind of political or social framework that doesn’t really want people to become gods or to rise above their stations. So you get power structures created, and power structures are what we call churches, and churches ultimately – thousands of years after the founders are dead, the churches are basically qlippothic. They become husks. They’re barely animated by anything of the original spirit.” Meaney, Patrick; Morrison, Grant. *Our Sentence is Up: Seeing Grant Morrison's The Invisibles* (Kindle Locations 9850-9859). Sequart Organization. Kindle Edition.

array of symbols and ideas to bridge “Being and its becoming,” the Supercontext and the words on the page.¹²¹

John Lamb Lash

Comparative mythologist John Lamb Lash (B: 1945) was raised Evangelical Protestant in the small fishing village of Friendship, Maine.¹²² After graduating from high school, Lash traveled widely: Europe, North Africa, Nepal, India, and East Asia. During his travels he had a series of religious experiences that he has spent his life attempting to understand. He turned to comparative mythology, a field in which he has published five books: *The Seeker's Handbook* (1991), *Twins and the Double* (1993), *The Hero - Manhood and Power* (1995), *Quest for the Zodiac* (1999), and *Not in His Image* (2006). In addition, Lash has posted nearly one-hundred essays on his website metahistory.org. Lash identifies himself as “true successor of Mircea Eliade and the rightful heir of Joseph Campbell.”¹²³

Lash did not begin to study the Nag Hammadi Codicess (NHC) until he was fifty years old. Prior to this, Lash had led a life marked by intense mystical and energetic experiences he sought to understand. It was only after reading the Nag Hammadi codices NHC that Lash felt he could finally comprehend the nature and function of this series of anomalous experiences. The result is the most vicious counter-memory and materialist explanation of Gnostic cosmology covered in this dissertation.

Counter-memory

In Lamb's revisionist history, late antique paganism is continuous with indigenous, pre-historical shamanism dating back to at least 9500 BCE (the end of the ice age).¹²⁴ Utilizing psychedelics and spiritual technologies to catalyze altered states of consciousness, shamans experience deep communion with *Gaia*, the world-spirit. *Gaia* reveals knowledge (*gnosis*) which included a moral code, programs for sustainable living, and the properties and uses of plants and

¹²¹ “The Gnostics’ is a conscious and reflected mythology. Using pre-existing material, the Gnostic shuffles them around and gives them a new task and purpose both profound and original: by penetrating the divine mystery to circumscribe and to clarify the same mystery of humankind.” Filoramo, *The History of Gnosticism*, 53.

¹²² My account of Lash's biography is assembled from the “Introduction” to *Not in his Image* and his five part autobiographical essay, “The Severed Rose.”

¹²³ <http://metahistory.org/siteauthor.php>

¹²⁴ Lash, *Not in his Image*, 26. On 28, Lash states “Paganism may be defined by the primary orientation of society to the natural world, the habitat, and perceived it holistically (sic).”

animals. Mediterranean Mystery religions, from the Eleusinian mysteries to the Cult of Mithras, are seen as the point when the oral pagan tradition was brought into an urban intellectual and literate environment. Paganism featured goddess oriented religion and matriarchical social organization that provided a means of sustainable, eco-conscious living.

Christianity exterminated paganism. To understand how, Lamb looks to the Dead Sea Scrolls. He sees Christianity as the outgrowth of an especially violent strain of Judaism: the line of Zaddok, a secret transmission that began when the Melchizedek anointed Abraham the patriarch.¹²⁵ This “cult of Melchizedek” or “cult of righteousness” maintained a secret chain of transmission throughout Jewish history independent from the filial lines of Benjamin, Aaron, and Levi.¹²⁶

The Zaddikites flourished at Qumran. Their numbers included John the Baptist and Jesus (whom he calls “the Yaasser Arafat of the Dead Sea Zaddikites”). Lash likens them to Jonestown or the Branch Davidians of Waco, and labels them the original religious terrorists.¹²⁷ In contrast to the pagans, the Zaddikites extolled a form of social organization that was patriarchal, gynophobic, and oppressive. It is from this small extremist group that the west would receive what Lash calls “the redeemer complex”: the doctrines of a masculine Creator God, a chosen people, the savior-messiah, and an impending apocalyptic judgment.¹²⁸

This complex became the “prime directive script,” or underlying mythic structure, of the west through the writings of Paul. On Lamb’s reconstruction, Paul was initially a “bounty hunter” set out to murder Zealots when he came under the instructions of Zaddikite priests. Paul subsequently invented the story of his own conversion on the road to Damascus and focused Messianic expectation on the figure of Jesus of Nazareth. In essence, he took the religion of the cult of Zaddok and, through speculation on the figure of Jesus, turned it into The small cult of Zaddok thus became a world religion. In the process, indigenous, matriarchical, and eco-consciousness pagans were wiped out. The redeemer complex is deemed responsible for millennia of religious violence, global warming, exploitation of resources, and colonialism. Counter-memories of early Christianity do not get much more vitriolic.

¹²⁵ The reference is to Genesis 14:18-20: Melchizedek King of Salem brought out bread and wine. Now he was the priest of the Most High God. He blessed Abram, saying, “Blessed be Abram by the Most High God, Creator of heaven and earth. Worthy of praise s the Most High God, who delivered your enemies into your hand.” Abram gave Melchizedek a tenth of everything.

¹²⁶ Lash, *Not in his Image*, 64-65.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 83.

¹²⁸ On the redeemer complex, see “The Cult of Righteousness” in *Not in his Image*, 57-70.

The Gnostics of late antiquity were the front line of defense against the rise of Christianity. They were “urban intellectual shamans,” “savants, polymaths, and prolific writers” who abhorred Christianity.¹²⁹ For Lash, the notion of “Gnostic Christianity” is an anachronism: “a retrofit contrived by scholars whose religious convictions prevent them from seeing, and admitting, that the greater part of Gnostic material was diametrically opposed to the Judeo-Christian ideology of salvation.”¹³⁰ We are told Emperor Theodosius (379-385) made it his mission to annihilate all teachings of the Gnostics and mystery religions.¹³¹ A small sect of Gnostics fled to the nearby Egyptian Dendura Temple dedicated to Hathor to hide.¹³² They buried the NHC before succumbing to the “Gnostic genocide.” After nearly 1600 years, the Nag Hammadi codices NHC allows us to see what early Christians deemed so threatening.¹³³

Lash reinterprets Christian references in the Nag Hammadi codices NHC in ways that help support his counter-memory of deep Gnostic-Christian antagonism. For example, contractions that refer to Jesus or Christ in the Coptic, such as $\overline{\chi\epsilon}$ (Christ) or $\overline{\iota\epsilon}$ (Ieseos), are argued to be incorrect suppositions. $\overline{\chi\epsilon}$ refers to the aeon $\chi\rho\iota\sigma\tau\omicron\varsigma$ (not Christ), while $\overline{\iota\epsilon}$ is a contraction of *Iasius* (apparently a reference to $\overline{\iota\alpha\sigma\iota\varsigma}$), or “healer.”¹³⁴ The aeon Christos, found in a variety of Nag Hammadi codices NHC texts, is argued to have nothing to do with the historical Jesus. Rather, it is a manifestation of the $\mu\epsilon\sigma\acute{o}\tau\eta\varsigma$ (*mesotaes*), which Lash defines as “the intermediary as an intrapsychic presence, accessible to every human being, all the time,” a figure that shaman-Gnostics contact through the imagination.¹³⁵ Even as Lash heaps invective on the figures of Christianity, then, he nonetheless conjures an interpretation of the Christ-figure in these texts that – despite its many linguistic errors – render the figure meaningful. That is, he is reinterpreting the Christ of his vision away from the Evangelical Christianity of his youth (which he now finds abhorrent) into a Gnostic frame where the Christos is still a powerful, transcendental spiritual entity.

¹²⁹ Lash, *Not in his Image*, 6.

¹³⁰ Lash, *Not in his Image*, 17.

¹³¹ Lash, *Not in his Image*, 54.

¹³² Ibid, 164-165.

¹³³ Ibid, 118.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 312. $\overline{\iota\alpha\sigma\iota\varsigma}$ is feminine nom for “healing.” LS 374A

¹³⁵ Ibid, 314. $\mu\epsilon\sigma\acute{o}\tau\eta\varsigma$ literally translates to: I. a middle or central position; II. A mean between two extremes. LS 500B. Lash acknowledges this is his own creation in his essay “Wooing of the Whore of Wisdom”: he imagistic reflex of the Aeon Christos in the terrestrial atmosphere, an effect that manifests in the luminous intrapsychic phantom of the Intermediary, the Mesotes. Although the made-up word Mesotes occurs in several places in the NHC and elsewhere, no text states literally that it is an afterimage left by the intercession of the Aeon Christos (episode 8). Rather, it is described as a persisting aroma. The afterimage concept is my addition to the narrative.

Gnostic Cosmology in Lash's Writings

The Nag Hammadi codices NHC shows the Gnostics were interested in more than anti-Christian polemics. In their shamanic experiences, these Gnostics had received knowledge of the nature, composition, and creation of the cosmos that contemporary science is only now discovering. For Lash, the Sophia mythos offers proof that Gnostics had envisioned the literal creation of our galaxy in altered states of consciousness (ASCs). His account of the Sophia mythos is synthesized from both the Nag Hammadi codices NHC and heresiological sources.¹³⁶

The Pleroma is a “spinning vortex of Organic Light [more on this in a moment], a radiant substance at the core of the Milky Way galaxy that Lash compares to soft, luminous nougat. Aeons are currents of energy that emanate from the Pleroma. The galactic arms of this primordial Milky Way are the *kenoma*, the emptiness, filled with inorganic matter. The aeon Sophia creatively dreams the Anthropos – “the pre-terrestrial human genome” – into being and projects it outward into the *kenoma*.¹³⁷ Infatuated with the Anthropos, Sophia “falls” from the galactic core and becomes ensared within the galactic arms. The subsequent creation of the Demiurge (Yaltabaoth) and his archons (the planets) literalizes the theogony and anthropogony found in Sethian texts such as *The Apocryphon of John*. From Sophia's error, our solar system is created.

Lash goes much further. Sophia *literally* becomes the earth (*Gaia*). Earth has no relationship to the inorganic matter of the *kenoma*. Sophia-Gaia emanates a divine radiance due to her origins in the Pleroma. This palpable, material, but invisible “Organic Light” imbues all substances on the earth. Lash equates the Organic Light with the Imaginal, as described by Islamicist Henri Corbin, which humans contact through their *nous*.¹³⁸

Neither the sun nor moon belongs to the cosmos of the archons either. The sun is Sabaoth, son of Yaldabaoth, who in *On the Origin of the World* and *Hypostasis of the Archons* condemned his father after seeing the image of the luminous Anthropos.¹³⁹ The moon is secreted from the earth's planetary body like a pearl. Humans are gifted *epinoia*, or imagination, conceived as the potential for super-conscious experience of the Organic Light. By fully

¹³⁶ Lash, “Wooing the Whore of Wisdom.”

¹³⁷ Ibid 173.

¹³⁸ Corbin is referenced in Lash, *Not in his Image*, 308. Corbin's primary writings on the Imaginal, *Hurqalya*, or the *mundus imaginalis* are *Alone with the Alone* and *Spiritual Body, Celestial Earth*. Access through the nous or heart, this imaginal realm is the intermediate space between matter and ideas, or the human and divine.

¹³⁹ See *On the Origin of the World* (NHC II,5.103.32-104.10) and *Hypostasis of the Archons* (NHC II,4 95.13-26). In *OrgWorld*, Sabaoth responds to Pistis denouncing Yaltabaoth's cry that there is no God above me and exhibiting her luminous form in the waters above. In *HypArch*, Zoe responds to the same call of Yaltabaoth, but her call turns into a fiery angel who casts Yaltabaoth into Tartaros.

realizing the faculty of *epinoia*, humans aid Gaia-Sophia in her evolution: to become a pure manifestation of Organic Light, like the *pleroma* itself.

The archons are currents of nefarious energy whose goal is to thwart human realization of their divine *epinoia*. Lash looks to contemporary UFO theory, particularly John Keel and Jacques Vallee, in order to understand the nature and function of the archons. They have used Salvationist religions like Christianity as a “spiritual control system (quoting Vallee).”¹⁴⁰ Archons infiltrate human consciousness on subliminal levels through cultural myths. Christianity is, for Lash, an *ideological virus* insinuated and maintained by the archons.¹⁴¹ Western culture’s history “genocide, ecocide, sexual repression, child abuse, social domination, and spiritual control” is proof this ideological virus is operative.¹⁴²

Lash believes the ancient Gnostics had experiences that would be seen today as abductions or UFO sightings. Archons as depicted in the Nag Hammadi codices NHC correspond to two types of aliens in the abduction literature: reptilians and greys. Yaltabaoth, described as a reptile with an animal head, is the avaricious, violent reptilian type; the lower archons are less fully developed, resembling the greys.¹⁴³ Yet because archons are inorganic (they do not issue from Sophia’s divine substance), they lack *epinoia*, love and goodness. They can only imitate. For Lash, the Sethian doctrine of the *antimimon pneuma* captures this.¹⁴⁴ Archon religion is a counterfeit of pagan wisdom: Jesus is the divine scapegoat; Yaltabaoth is a false, male creator who acts without the goddess; the religion is directed beyond the earth, rather than to and within it.

Humans do not recognize the influence of the archons because they have infiltrated our minds. One of the effects of archon influence is our skeptical dismissal of their existence. Archons let us believe they do not exist so they can control us more easily.

¹⁴⁰ Lash, *Not in his Image*, 257. Lash cites Vallee, *Messengers of Deception*, and Keel, *UFOs: Operation Trojan Horse*.

¹⁴¹ Lash, *Not in his Image*, 283.

¹⁴² *Idem*, 238.

¹⁴³ Lash, “Alien Dreaming: The Enigma of the Archons.” On Yaltabaoth as a serpent with a leonine head, see texts such as *The Apocryphon of John* (NHC II,1 10.8-9).

¹⁴⁴ As presented in *The Apocryphon of John*, the “counterfeit spirit” and “spirit of life” vie for the (souls) of human beings. The “spirit of life” descends from the Pleroma upon certain individuals, strengthening their spirits and thereby allowing them to overcome enslavement within materiality and evil (NHC II,1.25.16–26.22). By contrast, the “counterfeit spirit” is a creation of the chief archon Yaldabaoth, a degenerate copy of the “spirit of life” which leads souls into forgetfulness, lust for procreation, evil, and ultimately eternal punishment (26.32–28.32).

Well, shit.

Gnostic Spiritual Technologies, Then and Now

To break free from the spell of the archons' myth requires spiritual technologies that awaken human *epinoia*. Here Lash's personal life and the content of the Nag Hammadi codices NHC meet. In his autobiographical writings, Lash narrates his life as the slow realization of the nature of Organic Light through a series of mystical and bizarre experiences.¹⁴⁵ Before the age of five, he had a dream of a witch on his roof. He interpreted this as his *dakini guardian*, making this dream his induction into life as a *terton*, or "treasure-finder."¹⁴⁶ At 15, he experienced what he calls "a spontaneous kundalini arousal" which lasted on-and-off for six months. As a boy raised Evangelical in the costal village of Friendship, Maine, he had no way to interpret this.¹⁴⁷

During his travels Lash had his first experience of the Organic Light. In Nepal, he encounters a young girl waiting at a bus-stop. When he looked into her eyes he saw "two lakes of flame that emitted smoldering plumes of smoke. He felt a "rush of cold electrical infusion penetrating his whole body." And then:

I noticed that she herself was looking down a little to concentrate on what she was doing: her right hand bearing down steadily plunged a crystal dagger into the left ventricle of my heart at an acute angle. I caught the glint of the midday sun on the butt of the dagger as she placed her thumb on it and pressed, as if working a syringe, injecting into my heart the elixir she alone commands. The injection flushed like acid through every cell of my body. I felt a brutal electric luminosity flare beyond pain into a sensation that voided all sensation, my body dissolving into white light, white light into space, space into pure emptiness that swallowed the sky above me, the earth beneath my feet... And then there was nothing at all.¹⁴⁸

When he came to, the woman had disappeared. He surmises that she was an apparitional figure who had taken on form temporarily. It is significant to what degree all of Lash's early

¹⁴⁵ See Lash's five-part series, "The Severed Rose," on metahistory.org.

<https://www.metahistory.org/terma/severedrose1.php>

¹⁴⁶ Lash, "The Severed Rose, Part 1." He claims no authorized Buddhist lineage. Rather, he has been inducted spiritually.

¹⁴⁷ It was not until he read Paramahansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi* and encountered the term *sammadhi* that he would find a point of reference.

¹⁴⁸ Lash, "The Severed Rose, part 1."

experiences are embodied. The rising kundalini and experience described above both include a “brutal electric luminosity” the surges through his body before dissolving into an experience of this light. It is evident Lash’s interpretations of the Gnostics and this Light had to speak to this sense of embodiment.

In 1972, Lash then had a vision of a “human-like figure in flowing currents.” This being appeared as a concentrated form out of the palpable, honeycombed and buzzing “light.” At the time he interpreted as the risen Christ, and became deeply interested in the Esoteric Christianity of Rudolph Steiner.¹⁴⁹ This desire to find the “inner” meaning of Christianity would direct his mystical researches for the next twenty-plus years: until he found the Nag Hammadi codicesNHC.

In May 2000, while reading the NHC texts and writing *Not in his Image*, Lash cultivated a practice he calls the “plaster effect” in order to access the Organic Light with greater regularity. In essence, the practice requires a soft gaze that sees all objects in one’s horizon of vision as composed of a singular, uniform substance, like white plaster. Phenomenal colors are regarded as “painted on” to objects, are not intrinsic properties of this substance. When the practice is maintained, the seer will first experience the presence of a glowing luminosity over objects, and ultimately “step through the portal.” In his words:

With the attainment of the [philosopher’s] Stone, I became aware that standing steadily in the presence of the Organic Light always produces one and the same effect: a download of information, the living intelligence of the earth goddess. This is *theoria* in its original meaning, "beholding." This is divine *mathesis*, "instruction by the Light."¹⁵⁰

As he recounts it, Lash continued under the instruction of the Organic Light throughout the years he composed *Not in his Image*. He sees references to the light in the NHC as evidence that ancient Gnostics had experienced the very same Organic Light. Lash often references texts to suggest Gnostics encountered a living, palpable of light that was information-rich, such as the *Paraphrase of Shem*, “The Light was full of hearing and word,” or *Discourse on the Eighth and*

¹⁴⁹ Lash began to study the works of Rudolph Steiner immediately after this vision(1861-1925). Steiner founded the system of Anthroposophy. Steiner argued that modern science and mystical insight would mutually illuminate one another. Steiner’s philosophy stresses a sort of esoteric or mystical Christianity dependent on the crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus’ death and resurrection made the esoteric mysteries available to all. See Leijenhorst, “Rudolph Steiner,” 1084-1091.

¹⁵⁰ Lash, “The Severed Rose pt. 3.”

Ninth, “Rejoice over this revelation! For already from the Pleroma comes the power that is Light, flowing over us. For I see it! I see the indescribable depth.”¹⁵¹ In essence, *Not in his Image* is a revealed text.

Lash believes the historical Gnostics also wrote revealed texts, though their spiritual technologies were different. He sees two primary catalysts referenced by the historical Gnostics: entheogens and sex. The Tree of Gnosis, familiar from numerous texts in the NHC, is regarded as a psychedelic brew along the lines of the Eleusinian *kykeon*.¹⁵² In psychedelic states, Gaia imagistically reveals to humans the nature and function of the world, from the Sophia mythos to discovery of the double-helix DNA model.¹⁵³ In terms of sexuality, Lash sees references to the snake in the Garden of Eden as a Gnostic reference to the kundalini.¹⁵⁴ In order to defend themselves against archontic intrusion, Gnostics would raise the kundalini in sex rituals. References to the bridal chamber, or *nymphon*, are for Lash “a code term for the cell-of-light or protective aura generated by ritual intercourse. Within the cell, the initiates overcome the influence of the Archons who produce error in our minds, and threaten to take over our bodies.” The more Gnostics attuned themselves to the energy of the kundalini, the more *siddhas* they developed: remote viewing, molecular vision, telepathy, even teleportation.¹⁵⁵

Counter-memory and Anti-Semitism

After completion of *Not in his Image*, Lash began to research other “prime directive scripts” in order to examine whether they too might occlude the historical truth. Doing so brought him to reevaluate the Nazis. He is now an outspoken anti-semite, Holocaust denier, and critic of “white genocide.” In his words, “it is one of the greatest crimes on the earth to blame the German people and extort millions and millions of dollars of reparations from them, for something that they never did. . . .that fraud, that lie.”¹⁵⁶

¹⁵¹ Lash, *Not in his Image*, 219. The references are to *The Paraphrase of Shem* (NHC VII, 1.1.32-33) and *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* (NHC VI,6.57.28-31).

¹⁵² Lash, *Not in his Image*, 220-221.

¹⁵³ Lash is here invoking the arguments of Jeremy Narby in *The Cosmic Serpent*. See Lash, *Not in his Image*, 153.

¹⁵⁴ Within Hindu Tantra, the kundalini is technically the female serpent that “sleeps” within the subtle body, with her mouth over the lingam. The awakening of the kundalini is associated with an “altered state of energy” as the “serpent” shoots up the subtle body, activating the chakras and infusing the practitioner with ecstatic energy. See White, “Why Gurus are Heavy,” 59-61.

¹⁵⁵ On the kundalini, Gnostics and siddhis, see especially Lash, “Kundalini and the Alien Force.”

¹⁵⁶ Lash interview, “White Genocide and the Archontic Infection,” on <https://redice.tv/red-ice-radio/white-genocide-and-the-archontic-infection>. <https://redice.tv/> self-identifies as part of the “alt-right.” As of Dec 13, 2016, they have tabs for ‘Trump Wins!’, ‘#Brexit’, and ‘Podesta’. One of the top articles is “Yes, We Are Mainstream Now: Cadillac Tried to Cast Someone from the Alt-Right in a Commercial.”

Lash believes that the Jewish people, minions of the archons, created Hollywood so that they could infect the consciousness of western European people. Film is their perfect medium. Archons can only *mimic*. They cannot *create*. Film and television not only push false historical narratives (i.e., the Holocaust). They bury the “racial” or “folk” memory of the white European race beneath their stories. Lash refers to this as “white genocide”: the extermination of the culture, identity, and history of the white race. In his words:

Lash: The extermination of any *human* race, uninfected, is an unnatural thing. The extermination of infections is a natural thing. (pause) That should get some attention (laughter). . . .The extermination of infections is natural to the social organism of humanity as it is natural to the human body. And what are the cells in that immunological system called?

Interviewer: White blood cells.

Lash: *Right*. White blood cells.¹⁵⁷

In other words, exterminating the white race is unnatural. Exterminating an unnatural virus (Jewish persons) is natural.

Hearing someone so thoroughly dehumanize an entire ethnicity disturbing. Realizing he did so on an alt-right website that vocally supports Donald Trump is alarming. Nevertheless, Lash’s anti-semitism brings into focus an unsettling but unavoidable aspect of the reception of the Nag Hammadi codicesNHC. It is undeniable that presentations of the Hebrew YHVH as Ialdabaoth lend can be read as anti-semiticthemselves to anti-semitic interpretations.¹⁵⁸ Lash’s counter-memory of early Christianity, while historically incoherent, amounts to a reading of Judaeo-Christian history as the false worship of Ialdabaoth and his rulers. Having written in *Not in his Image* that Judeo-Christianity exterminated the pagans, it is unsurprising that he would find similar archontic dynamics at play in the contemporary world.

Analyzing Lash’s fall into virulent alt-right anti-Semitism draws attention to a further point: counter-memories can be dangerous and anti-modern. Anti-modern Traditionalism is as much a response to modernity as post-modernism. Lash imagines an enchanted and meaningful

¹⁵⁷ “White Genocide and the Archontic Infection.”

¹⁵⁸ In “White Genocide and the Archontic Infection,” Lash quotes Irenaeus AH 1.30.10: “Ialdabaoth himself chose a certain man named Abraham from among these, and made a covenant with him, to the effect that, if his seed continued to serve him, he would give to them the earth for an inheritance. Afterwards, by means of Moses, he brought forth Abraham’s descendants from Egypt, and gave them the law, and made them the Jews.”

pagan past to which he hopes to return. The shamanic techniques and spiritual technologies practiced by the Gnostics, being for Lash perennial manifestations of *Gaia* wisdom, are also found in Tibetan Buddhism, indigenous religions of South America, and kundalini yoga. These Gnostics discovered the nature of material and psychic reality that theoretical science is only now beginning to find. When the Gnostics were exterminated this perennial wisdom was lost to the west. As such, even as Lash looks to a multitude of religious forms, re-enchant the cosmos, and celebrate inner divinity, he invokes the Gnostics to preserve an (imagined) white, European racial memory against its Jewish opponents. These opponents remain a threat. For Lash, the Nag Hammadi Library is the historical scriptures he needs to legitimize his anti-modern, anti-semitic agenda. The ambiguous meanings of the category Gnosticism and contents of certain Nag Hammadi texts enable this possibility.

Post-Gnosticism: Religious Responses to Deconstruction

As covered in the previous chapter, academics such as Michael Williams and Karen King argued that “Gnosticism” as a category is neither accurate nor useful.¹⁵⁹ The formal characteristics thought to apply to ancient Gnostics cannot cover the full range of ancient texts it attempts to. King questions whether it is helpful to label groups “Gnostics” who identify in other terms, including *Christians*. Yet as we have also seen, the self-definitions of *contemporary* Gnostics are founded upon this category of Gnosticism and perform the understandings of the Gnostics put forth by scholars. What happens to them when Gnosticism disappears?¹⁶⁰

Within certain quarters of Ecclesiastical Gnosticism, deconstruction has been met with derision. Stephan Hoeller brushed it aside: “if it walks like a Gnostic and talks like a Gnostic and quacks like a Gnostic it is a Gnostic.”¹⁶¹ Members of the Apostolic Johannite Church, which claims to be the largest Gnostic organization in North America, instead went on the offensive. On his blog, Priest Jordan Stratford invokes the work of scholars like Gilles Quispel and Birger Pearson to argue *for* the usefulness of ancient Gnosticism.¹⁶² He further argues that it is logically absurd to abandon the term Gnosticism because it is either wrongly applied or did not exist in the

¹⁵⁹ Williams, *Deconstructing “Gnosticism,”* 51-53. King, *What is Gnosticism?*, 2-4, 7-9, 218-36.

¹⁶⁰ I examine this point in greater detail in Dillon, “The Impact of Scholarship on Contemporary ‘Gnosticism(s)’.” (forthcoming 2017).

¹⁶¹ “An Interview with Stephan Hoeller,” *The Gnostic* no 4, 15.

¹⁶² Stratford, “The Null Hypothesis.” Stratford is Archpriest and Apostolic Prefect within the AJC. <https://www.johannite.org/msgr-jordan-stratford/>

early centuries of the current era: “[Williams] really does employ this reasoning to insist that there’s no such thing *as us*.”¹⁶³ The point is clear: deconstruct ancient Gnosticism, and the [invented] traditions on which it is founded fall.

There has been another response to deconstruction, one I refer to as “Post-Gnosticism.”¹⁶⁴ By post-Gnosticism, I mean forms and practices of self-described “Gnostics” that accept deconstruction and respond creatively to it. There are four features of post-Gnosticism. First, these individuals model their Gnostic religion more closely on the primary texts, particularly the Nag Hammadi codices NHC. Second, scholarship on the Nag Hammadi codices NHC is utilized in the creation of new Gnostic practices and identities. Third, post-Gnosticism is reflexive. Where Quispel, Bloom, or Jay Kinney regarded the experiences behind various texts through time should be read as ontologically identical, post-Gnostics are more playful. They recognize category formation is an art, not science, and conduct their comparisons accordingly.¹⁶⁵ Finally, in post-Gnosticism the primary discourse shifts from experience to imagination. The underlying similarity between ancient texts like the NHC and modern instances like Jung, Philip K. Dick, and the Matrix is a shared imaginative understanding of the world. If it is impossible to identify the *ontos* ultimate reality behind *gnosis*, it is possible to create and inhabit a world that resonates with other Gnostics. As Miguel Conner often puts it, “write your own gospel and live your own myth.”¹⁶⁶

The following two case studies are both indicative of, and influential for, post-Gnosticism as I define it.

Miguel Conner and Aeon Byte

Miguel Conner was born and raised in Houston, Texas. His mother was Catholic but also interested in other religions. In addition to his confirmation in the Catholic Church, Miguel attended services at a wide range of Protestant denominations and other world religions in his youth. He attended Saint Thomas, the local Catholic University, and received a degree in

¹⁶³ Stratford, “The Null Hypothesis,” emphasis mine.

¹⁶⁴ To be clear, this is an *etic* category. Self-described Gnostics do not use it. I have come to use the term to differentiate these self-described Gnostics from Ecclesial Gnosticism and the earlier experiential perennialism found in Gnosis magazine and elsewhere.

¹⁶⁵ On this (very important) approach to comparison, see Doniger, *The Implied Spider*, 76-77. Similarly, see JZ Smith’s essays: “Map is not Territory”; “In Comparison a Magic Dwells”; “Religion, Religions, Religious.”

¹⁶⁶ Conner says this during the introduction to most every episode of Aeon Byte, previously Coffee, Cigarettes, and Gnosis.

communications. Though never antagonistic to his Catholic upbringing, Conner found himself drawn to explore everything from Buddhism to atheism and the New Age. He even became a born-again Evangelist for six months. As he describes it:

“It was the classic thing. You’re going through a crisis in life, you get down on your hands and knees, you hold the hands of the person who’s trying to proselytize to you, and you do that simple formula where you say, “I want Jesus in my heart; Jesus is the only one; the Bible is the only word of God,” and you are filled with this amazing energy which you presume must be the Holy Spirit. . . .I was happy for six months but I realized it wasn’t the Holy Spirit, it was endorphins and adrenalin I was injecting into my heart.”¹⁶⁷

After trying on a variety of religions, Conner found Gnosticism. He joined a local Gnostic church in Chicago but was kicked out.¹⁶⁸ Spiritually “homeless,” he decided to start a radio show devoted to the study of ancient Gnosticism. Initially called “Coffee, Cigarettes, and Gnosis,” the show premiered in 2006.¹⁶⁹ Soon renamed Aeon Byte, the show has run over 300 episodes to date. Conner’s blog, found on thegodabovegod.com, publishes his essays on a range of topics pertinent to contemporary Gnosticism.¹⁷⁰ “The Gnostic: A Journal of Gnosticism, Western Esotericism, and Spirituality,” edited by Andrew Phillip Smith, serves as the literary face of Aeon Byte, publishing many of the interviews and giving a venue for scholars and laypersons to write in an informal venue.¹⁷¹ Finally, Conner has published two books of interviews conducted with scholars on Aeon Byte, *Voices of Gnosticism* and *Other Voices of Gnosticism*.¹⁷² In short, Conner’s media has become the primary conduit of knowledge transfer

¹⁶⁷ “An Interview with Miguel Conner,” *The Gnostic* vol 4, 130.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 121-122. Miguel goes out of his way to avoid mentioning what church he was kicked out of. I see no reason to publish the who or why of this account.

¹⁶⁹ It premiered on the internet radio station Freethought Media <http://freethoughtmedia.org/>.

¹⁷⁰ <http://thegodabovegod.com/category/blog-posts/>

¹⁷¹ “The Gnostic” is published infrequently and sporadically, but has six issues to date (2009-2016).

¹⁷² Both books are published with Bardic press, the publisher of “The Gnostic.”

from the academy to religious Gnostics.¹⁷³ His presentation of the ancient Gnostics is as influential today as Stephan Hoeller's or Jay Kinney's once were.¹⁷⁴

Aeon Byte does not dodge the deconstruction of Gnosticism. Early in the podcasts' run, Conner conducted interviews with scholars from both sides of the debate: Karen King and Elaine Pagels arguing for dismissal of the term, Birger Pearson and Marvin Meyer advocating its continued relevance.¹⁷⁵ As recently as 2016, Conner is still asking scholars within Gnostic Studies about the Gnostic debates.¹⁷⁶ One byproduct of deconstruction is that Aeon Byte features interviews with scholars who specialize in specific historical movements and texts. For instance, Conner interviewed John Turner on the history of Sethian Gnosticism, Einar Thomassen on Valentinus and the Valentinians, and April DeConick on *The Gospel of Judas*.¹⁷⁷ If the issue with the category is that it cannot contain the diversity of unique religions it attempts to, then the solution is to gain a deep understanding of the various movements that can be labeled "Gnostic."

Aeon Byte and "The Gnostic" journal both analyze individual texts from the NHL and other collections. In this, they both go beyond *Gnosis* magazine, which never produced a translation or commentary of an ancient text. Moreover, the choice of texts is not limited to what Conner has called "the greatest hits" that receive most public attention.¹⁷⁸ "The Gnostic" offered translations and critical commentaries to texts like *Gospel of Thomas* and *Gospel of Judas*, in addition to translations of lesser-known texts like *The Three Steles of Seth* and "Untitled" from the Bruce Codex.¹⁷⁹ Episodes of Aeon Byte have been devoted to texts ranging from *The Gospel of Judas* to *Exegesis on the Soul*.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷³ By "knowledge transfer" I mean the transfer of academic discourse into non-academic culture. Knowledge transfer also covers the theoretical problems of this shift, including translation, simplification, the needs of publishers/museums/television stations, and the market into which academic knowledge is disseminated. A similar view is put forth by Matthew Collins in relation to the Dead Sea Scrolls: Collins, "Examining the Reception and Impact of the Dead Sea Scrolls," 241-245.

¹⁷⁴ Conner, *Voices of Gnosticism*, 2011; Idem, *Other Voices of Gnosticism*, 2016.

¹⁷⁵ Note the pertinent interviews in *Voices of Gnosticism*: "Birger Pearson," 69-82; "Marvin Meyer," 183-200; "Karen King," 151-66; and "Elaine Pagels," 135-150.

¹⁷⁶ See interview with April DeConick, "The Gnostic New Age," and Dylan Burns, "The Ancient War between Gnostics and Neoplatonists."

¹⁷⁷ All of these interviews are transcribed for *The Voices of Gnosticism*.

¹⁷⁸ "Interview with Miguel Conner," 126. The reference is to *The Gospel of Thomas*, *The Gospel of Mary*, *The Gospel of Judas*, *Thunder: Perfect Mind*, and *The Apocryphon of John*.

¹⁷⁹ Folks, "The Gospel of Judas: A Previously Unpublished Translation of the Complete Gospel of Judas," *The Gnostic* vol 1, 46-58; Grondin, "No Man's Land: Translational Issues in the Gospel of Thomas," *The Gnostic* vol 1, 104-106; "The Three Steles of Seth: John Turner's translation of this Sethian text from the Nag Hammadi Library," *The Gnostic* vol 1, 90-95; "The Gnosis of the Light: Untitled Apocalypse from the Bruce Codex," *The Gnostic* vol 4, 146-173.

¹⁸⁰ See "April DeConick: The Gospel of Judas and the Sethian Revolt"; "Andrew Phillip Smith: A Gnostic View of the Soul";

Taken altogether, the impact of Aeon Byte on cultural memory of the ancient Gnostics becomes clear. No underlying similarity between these ancient groups is taken for granted. Conner and others disseminate the work of scholars to the public, in the process exchanging a homogenous “Gnosticism” for a kaleidoscopic array of ancient Gnostic religions. Where popular documentaries have focused on “greatest hits” of interest to early Christianity, Aeon Byte includes analysis of lesser-known texts and movements.¹⁸¹ Listeners are encouraged to mix and match, but to do so from a place of rigorous historical understanding.

Much like *Gnosis* magazine, Aeon Byte discusses subject matter beyond ancient Gnostic texts that are of interest to the contemporary cultic milieu. Episodes have covered everything from Gnostic themes in Cormac McCarthy or the film *Prometheus* to near-death experiences.¹⁸² Where Aeon Byte differs is in the reflexivity and playfulness of its approach. As Conner says, “take this as literally, as mythologically, as psychologically as you want.”¹⁸³

The playful and combinative approach is illustrated in the introductions to each episode. With his deep, gravelly smoker’s voice, Conner greets the listener: “I am and I am Abraxas, in his meat-sack incarnation of Miguel Conner. . . .here from the virtual Alexandria, the state of mind where East meets West.” As Conner introduces the interviewee, a series of audio-clips are spliced together to create the mood. They might be lifted from films like *Jacob’s Ladder*, *Tron*, or *Monty Python’s Life of Brian*. Quotes might be read from ancient Gnostic texts or Mark Twain. Conner will insert a series of funny and pellucid sayings, like “You will receive Gnostic truth from the spiritual bootleggers from the Pleroma.”¹⁸⁴ And then Conner will introduce the interview subject and give an overview of their work.

The novelty and daring of Conner’s approach to the ancient Gnostics and their texts should not be overlooked. Sources are combined that have no connection to ancient Gnostic texts whatsoever. Conner and his producers know well that they are lifting from non-Gnostic sources, but that the quotes can be repurposed in that direction. Gods are the subject of good-humored appropriation (“I am Abraxas”) or scathing critiques.¹⁸⁵ Even the ancient Gnostics, idealized by

¹⁸¹ Dylan Burns’ interview on Platonic-Sethian texts, “The Ancient War between Gnostics and Neoplatonists,” is a case in point. See also Andrew Phillip Smith’s commentary on *The Apocalypse of Peter*: “Obnoxious Gnostics: The Apocalypse of Peter,” *The Gnostic* 3, 118-124.

¹⁸² “Gnostic Themes in the Fiction of Cormac McCarthy”; “Gnostic Themes in *Blade Runner*, *Prometheus*, and *Alien*”; “Death and the Otherworlds”.

¹⁸³ “An Interview with Miguel Conner,” 127. This saying is also common in his podcasts and underlies many of his blog entries.

¹⁸⁴ From the episode “Secret Revelations in the Gospel of Thomas.”

¹⁸⁵ The introductions often include Al Pacino’s rant from *Devil’s Advocate*: “He’s a tight-ass! He’s a sadist! He’s an absentee landlord! Worship that? Never!”

Conner, can be called “spiritual bootleggers.” Playfulness, humor, and a disarming lack of seriousness in the introduction sets the table for every rigorous conversation between Miguel and his guest.

The combinative and reflexive approach to the Gnostics relates to a final point: the discourse here has shifted from experience to imagination. Conner considers it “a terrible infraction [of modern Gnostics] of equating Gnosis with enlightenment when they’re two separate experiences.”¹⁸⁶ Gnosis is not mystical. When “you take the red pill. . . the first thing you’re going to see is not real or what is beautiful – you’re going to get a glimpse of it – but you’re also going to see what reality really is, which is a vast cosmos of emptiness and dark matter with just a little bit of light.”¹⁸⁷ Gnosis is the beginning of the hero’s journey, not the destination.

After the experience of gnosis, the Gnostic plunges into the world of imagination. Imagination here is framed as the realm where the divine meets the human psyche. The ancient Gnostic texts can be taken as literal, mythological, or psychological, but in any case, they are products that are interacted with imaginatively. To give a particularly poignant example, Conner is a mythicist. Yet he returned to regular Catholic services upon reading that it was common for Valentinians to participate in orthodox services, reads the Nag Hammadi codices NHL very closely, and alludes refers to himself as a Christian.¹⁸⁸ The myth of Christ provides a powerful symbol for the human imagination, a story through which one can bring meaning to suffering, and a shared cultural construct to participate in. Stress shifts from the signified to the symbolizing function of the imagination. In Conner’s own words:

“If God is supposed to be this gigantic mind, this pure, powerful imagination and creativity, and we are meant to emulate the mind of God or the mind of Christ, then I think our best weapon as modern Gnostics is to use our imagination and our creativity always as well as our reason.”¹⁸⁹

Jeremy Puma

¹⁸⁶ “An Interview with Miguel Conner,” 132.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 132.

¹⁸⁸ “Interview with Miguel Conner,” 130: “I always tell people that if April DeConick is right, and other scholars are right, they actually went to church, which I do, and then during the week practiced different things. I think that’s what a modern Gnostic should do.” The reference appears to be to DeConick, *The Thirteenth Apostle*, 17, 24.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 131.

Born and raised in south Florida, Puma received a BA in Philosophy from Flagler College. Since relocating to Seattle, Washington, Puma has become one of the most prolific authors among contemporary Gnostics. To date he has self-published seven books on contemporary Gnostic belief and practice.¹⁹⁰ He has appeared on Aeon Byte at least four times and contributes frequently to Andrew Philip Smith's journal *The Gnostic*.¹⁹¹

In the early 2000's, Puma was a priest-in-training for the *Hagia Sophia Gnostic Church*, Seattle's parish of the *Ecclesia Gnostica*. In 2005, he founded the website PalmTreeGarden.org as a meeting place for contemporary Gnostics. Other figures within Ecclesial Gnosticism would join such as Jordan Stratford, as well as Miguel Conner and Andrew Phillip Smith. In 2006, the board began to host reading groups to discuss Gnostic Studies scholarship.¹⁹² Subjects included authors from John Turner to Karen King. It is at this point many in the community were first introduced to the academic deconstruction of Gnosticism and tried to make sense of what this meant for their own identity and practice.¹⁹³ For Puma, exposure to Gnostic Studies scholarship would completely revise his conception of the ancient Gnostics and, by extension, drive him to reformulate his Gnostic identity and practice.

In the book he wrote to break away from the Ecclesial Gnostics, *This Way: Gnosis without Gnosticism*, Puma points out contemporary academics such as Williams and Ismo Dunderberg had shown reifications of "ancient Gnosticism" to be unfounded.¹⁹⁴ Puma then turned to Gnostic Studies scholarship to help redefine his relationship to the NHC and his identity as a Gnostic. He defines a Gnostic as "someone who pursues gnosis within the context of a particular set of myths, most of which are represented in a number of Christian non-Biblical texts referred to as Sethian."¹⁹⁵ Puma thus adopts the position of Bentley Layton that Irenaeus' account of a myth assigned to certain "Gnostics" refers to a group of self-defined *gnostikoi* in the ancient world, and that this myth represents their worldview.¹⁹⁶ Layton's hypothesis informed

¹⁹⁰ Puma's writings prior to his break with Ecclesial Gnosticism: *Running Towards the Bomb*; *The Pirate's Garden*; *Mysteries of the Gnostic Ascent*; *The Face of the Sky and Earth*; Puma's writings after the break: *This Way: Gnosis without Gnosticism*; *A Gnostic Prayerbook*; and *How to Think Like a Gnostic*.

¹⁹¹ The Aeon Byte episode list is not publically accessible. Puma appears on the following episodes: "Gnosis without Gnosticism," "How to Think like a Gnostic," "An Introduction to Philip K. Dick" and "The Gospel of Thomas."

¹⁹² Palmteegarden.org is now defunct. My research on this fascinating community has been conducted through all available snapshots of the site available on archive.org.

¹⁹³ See Dillon, "The Impact of Scholarship on Contemporary 'Gnosticism(s)'".

¹⁹⁴ Puma, *This Way*, kindle edition, loc. 215-259.

¹⁹⁵ Puma, *How to Think Like a Gnostic*, loc. 101.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., loc. 162-87, and 2587; Ir. *Haer.* 1.29-30 (Rousseau/Doutreleau); Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 5-22; idem, "Prolegomena to the Study of Ancient Gnosticism," 334-50.

the work of two later academics, Alastair Logan and David Brakke, each of whom attempted to reconstruct the ritual practice and worldview of these *gnostikoi*.¹⁹⁷ Put simply, Puma's response to the deconstruction of Gnosticism is to turn to a subset of academics that delimit the Gnostics *specifically* to a possible Sethian religious community.

In his next book, *How to Think like a Gnostic*, Puma articulates how to enter this Sethian myth as a worldview that accommodates genuine revelations, anthropic dualism (distinction between the spirit and body), acosmism (humans are not made for this world), real archons and a Christocentric focus in the modern age, best illustrated in his formula of "Gnosis":

*Gnosis = Awakening (Word/Christ + Wisdom/Sophia).*¹⁹⁸

"Awakening" refers to an individual experience through which one recognizes time, space and materiality to be illusory instruments of control presided over by the archons, or what Puma calls the "World of Forms," which mask the eternal reality of the Pleroma. The parenthetical statement is, in the first part, a direct interpretation of *Ap. John* NHC II,1.23.27–36, where Christ descends in the form of an eagle, and the character Epinoia ("afterthought," "consciousness") descends in the form of the Tree of Gnosis, or Light, in order to awaken Adam and Eve. In a second sense, they are interpreted practically: Word/Christ refers to the discursive forms of Gnostic knowledge: speech, myths, rituals and rites.¹⁹⁹ Sophia is conceived as the capacity to interpret the meaning of the revealed, discursive knowledge and also the need to enact those lessons through service and action.²⁰⁰ Lastly, Sophia and Christ are not *merely* psychological phenomena for Puma: they are also ontologically unique, independent entities.²⁰¹

Puma clarifies this seeming ambiguity between psychological, practical and hypostatic readings of *Ap. John* in his discussion of archons.²⁰² Archons manifest within the psyche as instincts, fears and compulsions that keep us wedded to the World of Forms; within political and social systems that utilize fear as a controlling mechanism to prevent recognition of gnosis; and as hypostatic entities capable of paranormal manifestation. To explain this multivalence, Puma

¹⁹⁷ See Logan, *Gnostic Truth*; idem, "Mystery"; Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 74–76.

¹⁹⁸ Puma, *How To Think Like A Gnostic*, loc. 364.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., loc. 404.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., loc. 1211.

²⁰¹ Ibid., loc. 1231.

²⁰² Ibid., chs. 9–11.

refers to a framework formulated by science-fiction author Philip K Dick (1928–1982).²⁰³ As noted above, Dick considered the possibility that the universe is a two-source hologram composed of information. The first source, Form I, is Dick’s parallel to the Gnostic Pleroma. Form II, often called the Black Iron Prison, is responsible for madness, chaos, and perceived evil—Dick’s parallel to the material world created by the Demiurge and guarded by archons.²⁰⁴ Humans are information-processing creatures who receive signals primarily from Form II. For Puma, in a holographic universe composed entirely of information, the archons are *processed* identically, whether *experienced* psychologically, politically or paranormally. This epistemological position allows Christ and Sophia to be understood as ontologically independent—i.e., “real”—revealers, not just psychological states or metaphors. Christ in Puma’s system bonds (like the “plasmate” of Philip K. Dick) with an individual to awaken them to the living information beaming from Form I, the Pleroma. Utilizing Dick’s conceptual framework, Puma has attempted not just to *interpret* the view of the Sethian texts, but to actually *adopt* it as a lived worldview that has room for psychological, political and hypostatic entities. To awaken from Form II, though, requires rituals—in particular rituals adopted from classical Gnostic texts themselves.

Puma’s Ritual of the Five Seals

In his effort to practice as a contemporary Gnostic, Puma creates rituals based on the NHC. In order to do so, he must lean considerably on the scholarship which has attempted to reconstruct Gnostic rituals from these inchoate, difficult ancient sources. I offer here an analysis of Puma’s ritual of the Five Seals to give a sense how the NHC and scholarship influence the practice of what I am calling post-Gnosticism.

The ceremony of the Five Seals is mentioned only in a few texts—the *Trimorphic Protennoia* (NHC XIII*,1), *Egyptian Gospel* (NHC III,2; IV,2), and the long recensions of *Ap. John*.²⁰⁵ References to the ceremony are sufficiently vague as to have led to diverse reconstructions from respected scholars. Most recent scholars have followed Turner’s lead and

²⁰³ For a firsthand account of these events, see Dick, *Valis* or *The Exegesis*. The best biographical study of Dick remains Sutin, *Divine Invasions*.

²⁰⁴ Dick, *Valis*, 96–101.

²⁰⁵ Puma, *A Gnostic Prayerbook*, loc. 1078–1278.

posited that the “five seals” referred to a visionary form of baptism.²⁰⁶ Puma grounds his reconstruction in Turner’s hypothesis. He also turns to the writings of David Brakke and Alistair Logan to assert the Five Seals included chrismation of the senses that gave the ascending soul power over Ialdabaoth.²⁰⁷ Bringing these hypotheses together, Puma creates his own “self-initiation into Sethian Gnostic mythology.”²⁰⁸

Beginning with an invocation of the Great Invisible Spirit and the upper aeons of the aeonic realm, the aspirant reads aloud the first *Stele of Seth* (the first part of the Platonizing Sethian tract, the *Three Steles of Seth* [NHC VII,5]). Upon completion of the first *Stele*, the initiate disregards his earthly robes and puts on the Robe of Glory (or Robe of Light), symbolized by a clean white robe. This is a direct reference to another Sethian treatise, the *Trimorphic Protennoia* (“First Thought in Three Forms”—NHC XIII*,1), where the Gnostic is stripped of chaos (the corporeal and the psychic bodies) to be clothed in light.²⁰⁹ Then, the initiate (in Puma’s rite) anoints or “seals” each of their own five senses (eyes, ears, nose, mouth, hands) with myrrh and olive oil. Each seal is given in the name of the Christos, Sophia, Barbelo, Emmacha Seth, as well as each one of the angelic beings known as the Four Luminaries (Harmozel for eyes, Oroiael for ears, Dauethai for nose, Eleleth for mouth), before invoking the Luminaries as a group for the fifth seal (hands).²¹⁰ The recipe of myrrh and olive oil for the ointment is not extant from classical Gnostic writings; rather, it is a hypothesis of Logan, who suggests such a recipe was used as early as the first century CE.²¹¹ Puma’s account of the anointment of the five senses is also unattested in the texts, following rather from a reconstruction conveyed in Brakke’s *The Gnostics*.²¹² Afterwards the initiate lies in the form of the cross on the floor, closes one’s eyes and dispels each of the seven planetary archons from *Ap. John*, name by name, before reciting the second ‘Stele of Seth.’ These two acts combined form the hypothesized visionary ascent after the reception of the sealing.

²⁰⁶ See Turner, “Ritual in Gnosticism,” 137–49. For a contrasting view of Five Seals as water baptism, see Sevrin *Le Dossier baptismal Sethian*, 37–38.

²⁰⁷ Logan, “Mystery,” 192–93 asserts the “faculties of the soul” (two eyes, two ears, and mouth) were anointed; Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 75–76 suggests both the faculties of the soul and the five senses (eyes, ears, hands, mouth, and nose). Neither *Trim. Prot.* nor *Holy Book* mentions myrrh and olive oil.

²⁰⁸ Puma, *How to Think Like a Gnostic*, loc. 1078.

²⁰⁹ *Trim. Prot.* NHC XIII*,1.48.1–16.

²¹⁰ Puma, *Gnostic Prayerbook*, loc. 1140–83. These Four Lights (or Luminaries) appear in the context of the “five seals” in the *Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit* NHC III,2.65.13–22. On the Four Lights, see also *Trim. Prot.* NHC XIII*,1.38.35–39.5, and *Apoc. John* NHC II,1.8.4–20 (and par.).

²¹¹ Logan, “Mystery,” 193–97.

²¹² Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 75–76. Logan, “Mystery,” 192–93, posits instead that the anointing is on the faculties of the soul (two eyes, two ears, and mouth), but Puma cites Brakke, ad loc. 228.

The culmination of the Five Seals is, for Puma, a visionary experience that incorporates one into “the community of knowers,” or fellow Gnostics. This inference is not obvious from the text of *Trim. Prot.*, but is an interpretation of the first person plural language in the text that Brakke takes to relate to an earlier section of the *Trim. Prot.* (NHC XIII*, 1.45:13–20). As Brakke reconstructs it,

As *First Thought in Three Forms* presents the ritual, it seems that the person is “washed in the wellspring of the water of life” after putting on the ritual robe. Both of these steps, stripping/clothing and washing, take place under direction of divine beings who are called “enrobers” and “Baptists,” respectively... The baptized person is given “a throne from the throne of glory” by “the enthroners,” and then “the glorifiers” glorify the candidate “with the glory of the kinship.” Finally, “those who catch up” take the person “into the luminous places of that person’s kinship” – a reference perhaps to some form of mystical ascent and contemplation.²¹³

Upon entering “into the luminous places of that person’s kinship,” the initiate in Puma’s rite is granted a new name, a reference to the anointing of the Son as Christ by the Father: “in this community of knowers, I shall be known as [N]. I now stand as a child of Seth and his immovable, immutable lineage.”²¹⁴ Like Christ himself (according to Puma), the initiate is born and named, inhabiting the living water in the image of the Father and then named by him. He or she has become one of the *gnostikoi*, or “knowers,” temporarily free of the World of Forms, and a member of the lineage of Seth.

Puma’s identity and practice highlights the key features of post-Gnosticism. He clearly depends on Gnostic Studies both for rituals and identity. None of the interpretations of the “five seals” necessarily follow from the ancient sources, nor is it immediately apparent that one must read *Ap. John*, *Trim. Prot.* and *Holy Book* as intertexts. Only thanks to scholars reconstructing the rituals of ancient Gnostics (specifically, from Sethian texts) is it possible for Puma create this rite. The delimited notion of the *gnostikoi* is derived from the scholarship of Layton, Logan, and

²¹³ Brakke *The Gnostics*, 75.

²¹⁴ Puma, “Initiation: The Mystery of the Five Seals,” *A Gnostic Prayerbook*, loc. 1249.

Brakke. In contrast to “Gnosticism” broadly construed, the classical *gnostikoi* provide a legitimate ancient model for Puma.

Conclusions

The case studies in this chapter bring to the foreground new dimensions of the religious reception of the Nag Hammadi Codices. Of these, four deserve further reflection: the impact of scholars and scholarship; reception and comparative practices in the cultic milieu; the ambivalence of modernism; and symbolic loss and the transformation of tradition.

Gnosticism did not exist in the ancient world as a category that did not exist until the modern era world. It is a modern construct founded on polemics (Protestant-Catholic) through heresiological comparisons, particularly the writings of Irenaeus of Lyons and Hippolytus of Rome. Karen King is right that scholars in the 19th and 20th century utilized Gnosticism to separate true Christianity (in their estimation) from deviations, transgressions, and heresies. What this chapter makes clear, however, is that *at the same time* the construction of Gnosticism offered a paradigm in the ancient world for alternative, non-traditional approaches to Christian symbols. Typological and essential characteristics of Gnosticism that were deemed heretical came to be embraced by those uninterested in identifying with popular Christianity. Imagistic thinking, speculative mythology, mysticism, and a syncretic approach to religious ideas became the foundation for Gnostic identity in the 20th century.

The case studies in this chapter all highlight the deep impact of scholarship on self-described Gnostics. Every one of the cases in this chapter lean heavily on scholars who constructed Gnosticism as a religion separate from Christianity: Jonas, Filoramo, Rudolph, etc. It is unclear whether Dick and Morrison ever read more than a few texts in the Nag Hammadi Library. Their most obvious influences were scholars who wrote about the NHC as representative of historical Gnosticism. Bloom discovered his Gnostic identity while reading Jonas' *The Gnostic Religion* and developed his own idiosyncratic understanding of the gnostic tradition through scholars like Ioan Couliano, Bentley Layton, Gershom Scholem, and Henri Corbin. Lash regards himself as a scholar and positions his readings vis-à-vis academic Gnostic Studies. Conner and Puma exhibit the most profound impact of scholarship on Gnostic identity in the 21st century. With the deconstruction of Gnosticism, these two figures proceeded to

construct new Gnostic identities through the work of scholars. Their playful, imaginative approach to being a Gnostic is balanced by historically and hermeneutically rigorous approach to the NHC.

The case studies in this chapter further illuminate the potentials and perils of comparative practices within the cultic milieu. On the one hand, it is to be appreciated that all of these authors embrace religious texts, ideas, and practices from non-Judeo-Christian traditions. The syncretic orientation attributed to ancient Gnostics helps to legitimize such a comparative practice. In these six case studies alone, we have seen how the Nag Hammadi codices NHC is read in light of ancient mystery religions, Zoroastrianism, Tantric Hinduism, the Sufism of ibn'Arabi and Henri Corbin, Zen Buddhist meditation, Kabbalah, and shamanism. To be sure, behind this effort lay a genuine desire to embrace the unprecedented religious pluralism in the American context.

On the other hand, the implicit comparative practices of our case studies oft fall prey to perennialism (both philosophical and psychological) and decontextualization.²¹⁵ The acceptance of a perennial wisdom or psychological experience is most obvious in *Gnosis* journal, John Lamb Lash's work, and Bloom's understanding of *gnosis*. Taking religious ideas and practices out of their original context, and – and then misinterpreting and romanticizing them, – is also apparent in our cases studies. Grant Morrison's life and *The Invisibles* is the most prominent example. In his practice of chaos magic and combinative mythology, Morrison incorporated hatha yoga, various forms of meditation, sex magic, while introducing a dizzying number of religious symbols and ideas into his narrative. That said, with Conner and Puma we can see the turn towards more reflexive, contextualized, but still playful comparative practice. Both authors are mindful of the differences between exemplars they bring together in their practices and myth, but rather than make an ontological claim (these are the same), they make a pragmatic one (these can be used to ensure similar results).

Ambivalent responses to modernization are brought into high relief in this chapter. Actors within the cultic milieu like Dick, Morrison, and Miguel Conner embrace humanism, democracy, pluralization, and scientific discourses. However, the dark side of modernization is

²¹⁵ For the connection between philosophical perennialism (*philosophia perennis*) and psychological perennialism (*psychologia perennis*) I am indebted to William Parsons. *Philosophia perennis* (or “perennial philosophy”) refers to the notion a (often Hermetic) philosophy underlay all religious systems. This notion was particularly influential during the Renaissance, and would continue throughout the modern era. *Psychologia perennis* marks a translation of *philosophia perennis* into a psychological register in the 20th century. The perennial philosophy is reframed as a uniform set of (typically mystical) psychological experiences and insights that can be found throughout world religions. In other words, whereas *philosophia perennis* denotes a perennial ontos, *psychologia perennis* denotes a perennial epistemology. See Parsons, “Psychologia Perennis and the Academic Study of Mysticism.”

also apparent. In the case of Harold Bloom this is apparent in a disavowal of identity politics within the academy. His concern for “tradition” – in literature, in gnostic religion – leaves him antagonistic to the critical studies turn in literary and religious studies, at which point Yale created a “department of one” for him. Similarly, Bloom sees contemporary American Gnosticism as a pale imitation of the elite models from ancient Alexandria and the Kabbalists of Safed. Far more troubling is the work of John Lamb Lash. Lash’s case shows the extent to which counter-memories can go. Not only is the Catholic church the subject of vitriol; the entire civilization on which it was founded is subject to critique. The desire to return to the paganism is at the same time a desire to undo excesses of modernization. His anti-Semitism is but a part of his larger suspicion that most modern institutions are under the influence of archontic forces.

Finally, these case studies force us to nuance the relationship between suggest how symbolic loss and the Christian tradition can be answered for with reference to Christian symbols but *without* any reconnection to the tradition. To be sure, Bloom, Morrison, and Lash would never identify as a Christian, and Dick, Conner, and Puma primarily identify as Gnostics (even as they refer to themselves as Christians at certain points). Yet most of the figures covered in this chapter turned to the Nag Hammadi codices NHC during a period of social isolation, depression, or identity confusion. All had lost their affective attachments to shared cultural symbols.²¹⁶ Dick, Bloom, Morrison, Lash, and Conner all read Nag Hammadi codices NHC in order to make sense of intense psychological and religious experiences and to reinterpret the symbol of Christ. After their reading of the NHC, our authors developed a coherent sense of Gnostic identity and, according to their own testimony, overcame their depression.

I conclude that a fundamental part of the NHC’s religious significance is that it offers the possibility of a new approach to Christian symbols beyond the Christian tradition. Our cases can assert violent counter-memories of early Christian tradition while simultaneously achieving personal and meaningful (re-)connections to its symbols, particularly Christ. Our cases do not revive ancient Christologies from the NHC indiscriminately. Their Christologies (mythicism, the Christos as an aeon inhabiting the Imaginal, Jesus the Jewish-Gnostic, or Christ as a new ‘Form’ beaming into the reality-hologram and healing material reality) cannot be found either in the Christian tradition or in the NHC. Rather, they read these new relationships to Christ out of the Nag Hammadi Library – creative misinterpretations (or, in Bloom’s term, misprision) that tell us

²¹⁶ I provide a more rigorous and nuanced exploration of the psychodynamics of symbolic loss, intense religious experiences, and NHC reception in “Symbolic Loss, Memory, and Modernization in the Reception of the Nag Hammadi Library.”

more about the readers than the ancient texts themselves. As mainline and traditional forms of Christianity continue to lose members, and as traditional Christianity is increasingly equated with Evangelical forms in the American imaginary, this phenomenon of turning to the NHC as a resource outside Christianity – yet seeking to relate to its symbols – will require further attention. It may be an ephemeral phenomenon. Or it could be the beginnings of a new approach to Christian symbols suited to the American context.

Chapter 4: Mary Magdalene

“Insofar as biblical religion is still influential today, a cultural and social feminist transformation of Western society must take into account the biblical story and the historical impact of the biblical tradition. Western women are not able to discard completely and forget our personal, cultural, or religious Christian history. We will either transform it into a new liberating future or continue to be subject to its tyranny whether we recognize its power or not.” ~ Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza¹

“Most dismayed is the fact that the misogynist narrative was made *sacred* or *holy*, so that *it* rather than the authentic narrative, became Christianity’s *truth*. A bogus, yet sacralized, representation of our past has been used to control and subject half of the Christian population to the other half, affecting the real lives of men and women at the altar and in the bedroom for nearly 2000 years.” ~ April DeConick²

“To resist the reduction and fragmentation of Mary Magdalene is to resist seeing her only as protagonist in a love or porno story, as madwoman, or victim, or lone hero, and also only as religious intellectual and leader. Attempting such resistance is resisting our own fragmentation.” ~ Jane Schaberg³

Introduction

On February 13th, 1950, Bishop Joseph F. Flannelly of Saint Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City preached a sermon on Mary Magdalene. Bishop Flannelly presents Mary as an inspiration to those seeking to improve their behavior during Lent:

The fact that God gave you the seed of his word does not mean that you are saved. .
.Mary Magdalene represents good ground. She was not good all her life. She was hard and rocky. But when the grace of God was offered to her and the word of God sounded in

¹ Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, xix.

² DeConick, *Holy Misogyny*, 149.

³ Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, 353.

her ears, she accepted the word and the truth. . . Her conversion convinces us you can turn hard ground into good ground.⁴

I quote this sermon not because it is extraordinary, but because of how ordinary it is while relaying the traditional, misogynist memory of Mary Magdalene. She is remembered here as the woman Jesus exorcised of seven demons and a former prostitute.⁵ After her conversion at Jesus' feet she became his follower, witnessed his crucifixion, and was the first to see him after the resurrection. But Bishop Flannelly does not celebrate Mary for her role as witness. The message of the sermon is that Mary is significant due to her penitence and acceptance – in other words, her vulnerability, passivity, and acceptance. The gendered metaphor of the rocky and welcoming ground further emphasizes that Mary is significant for *receiving* grace and *hearing* the word.⁶ She has been transformed from a rocky ground (sexuality) to a fertile one (chastity).

The publication of the Nag Hammadi Codices and Berlin Codex have led to a radical revisioning of this traditional memory of Mary Magdalene. The dialectic of the past with the present here is especially profound in the American context. Mary Magdalene in these newly rediscovered Coptic texts confirms that early Christian communities remembered her as the companion of Jesus, the one whom he loved more than any other. They show Mary in a leadership role amongst the early apostles, comforting them at the passing of Jesus and relaying secret knowledge to them. They show Mary in conflict with Peter over the role of women and visions in the early church. And in none of them is she a prostitute.

This chapter analyzes how these newly rediscovered Coptic texts have been utilized to reimagine Mary Magdalene in five distinct locations of knowledge: scholarship, Catholicism, new religions, historical novels, and spirit channels. First, I outline the sources (New Testament, Nag Hammadi Codices, and Berlin Codex) that are being read by contemporaries to reimagine Mary Magdalene.⁷ These sources are interpreted to present Mary Magdalene as the apostle to the

⁴ "Inspiration Found in Mary Magdalene," NYTimes Feb 13, 1950, page 16.

⁵ The tradition Mary Magdalene was possessed by seven demons is found in Luke 8:2 and Mark 16:9. Though not identified by name, Mary Magdalene became conflated in memory with the "sinner" who wets Jesus' feet with her tears and anoints them in Luke 7:36-50. Mary Magdalene also attempts to anoint Jesus' corpse in all four gospels and is one of or the first to see the resurrected Christ in Matthew and John. The conflation of these separate traditions into a single memory of Mary Magdalene was legitimized by Pope Gregory the Great (540-604) in his Homily XXXIII (PL 76:1239-40).

⁶ On the metaphor of the field and the seed as gendered, see DuBois, *Sowing the Body: Psychoanalysis and Ancient Representations of Women*, 39-84.

⁷ While the *Pistis Sophia* could certainly be included in this study, I have avoided it for the following reasons: 1) the *Pistis Sophia* was much more influential prior to the discovery of the NHC and Berlin Codex. It influenced G.R.S. Mead and the Theosophical Society a great deal, but it has simply been eclipsed by the newly discovered texts; 2) the largest influence of the *Pistis Sophia* is currently in central and south America (see Winter, "Studying the

apostles, a religious mystic, an ancient feminist, the Christian goddess, wife of Jesus, a priestess of Isis, a sex therapist, or some combination thereof. While this tremendous spectrum of counter-memories contain conflicting and, at times, historically implausible presentations of Mary, what they all share is a critique of traditional memories of Mary Magdalene within the Christian church like those preached by Bishop Flannely. All of the subjects analyzed here contrast their new presentations of Mary with her traditional portrayals as penitent prostitute and madwoman.

I argue that these revisions of Mary Magdalene must be understood in light of the tectonic shifts in sexual relations, feminism, and gender philosophy in the late 20th and early 21st centuries in America. More specifically, I read these revised memories as attempts by Christian women to assert new models of female identity, sexuality, and gender as part of the Christian tradition. Many of the authors covered below use Mary Magdalene to call for new forms of female religious leadership, ranging from inclusion of women in the Catholic priesthood to a renewed form of prophecy through channeling. In terms of sexuality, Mary Magdalene can be the prototype of the bride within a sacred marriage (*hieros gamos*) with Jesus. As mother of Jesus' child, she offers a more realistic mother prototype than the virgin Mary. Or Mary Magdalene can be the paradigm of a sexually liberated woman who is not tied down to a single mate, has sex for pleasure (not just procreation), and pursues mystical visions through sacred sex. Finally, these revised memories of Mary Magdalene hope to articulate new possibilities for the female gender in a Christian context. At times, this can be deeply essentializing, attributing "will, force, and violence" to masculinity and "intuition, receptivity, and compassion" to femininity. In certain cases, Mary Magdalene comes to represent a highly complex new gender possibility that deconstructs essentialized gender binaries.

Finally, behind several of these revised memories (particularly those of Jane Schaberg, Margaret Starbird, and Gloria Amendola) is a story of profound alienation from the Christian tradition of their youth. Each come to realize that the tradition they love and are profoundly attached to is misogynistic, patriarchal, and sexist. These three turn to Mary Magdalene as a figure who allows them to reconstruct the frame of Christian origins to include a powerful female within Christian origins and, by extension, develop a new place for their own identity within the tradition.

The Sources

"Gnostic Bible": Samuel Aun Weor and the *Pistis Sophia*"); and 3) this dissertation is concerned with the Nag Hammadi Library and its reception. The *Pistis Sophia* deserves its own, separate reception history.

The symbol of Mary Magdalene in the Christian imagination has been complex and contradictory from the origins of Christianity. Within the canonical gospels a woman by this name is healed by Jesus of possession by seven demons (Luke 8:2; Mark 16:9), is a witness to the crucifixion, and is the first person to see Christ after his resurrection. Mary Magdalene is identified as the woman “from whom seven demons had gone out.”⁸

Mary called Magdalene is a witness to the crucifixion in each of the canonical gospels, but details of her position in relation to the cross and who she is with vary. In Mark 15:40 Mary Magdalene, mother Mary and Salome watch from a distance. In Matthew 27:55-56, she again sees the crucifixion from a distance with Mary mother of James and Joseph, as well as the mother of the sons of Zebedee (not Salome). Luke preserves the tradition of women watching the crucifixion from a distance but does not identify them individually (Luke 23:49). But John places Mary Magdalene, mother Mary, and mother Mary’s sister Mary of Clopas right near the foot of the cross (John 19:25).

The canonical gospels are similarly contradictory on Mary Magdalene’s post-resurrection visions of Jesus. In Matthew, she and “the other Mary” came to look at the tomb (Matthew 28:1). An angel of the Lord rolls away the stone to reveal an empty tomb. These two women are then greeted by Jesus and told to take word of his resurrection to his “brothers” (Matthew 28:9). In the Markan appendix Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene individually and asks her to carry news of his resurrection to the ones weeping and mourning his passing (Mark 16:9-11). Luke, however, again lowers Mary Magdalene’s status. She, Joanna, and Mary mother of James come to the tomb and are greeted by two dazzling angels (Luke 24:3). These angels – not the risen Jesus – tell the three to inform the other disciples of Jesus’ resurrection (Luke 24:10). In sharp contrast, John relays that Mary Magdalene *alone* first came to the tomb (John 20:1). After she informs Peter and the Beloved Disciple the tomb is empty, these latter two come and proclaim that Jesus has risen. Still, it is to Mary Magdalene that Jesus first appears. She does not recognize him at first, but when she does, she is overwhelmed with emotion. Jesus tells her to go inform the other disciples (John 20:11-18).

Based solely upon the traditions preserved of “Mary called Magdala,” then, it would seem that this women played a prominent role in early Christian memory. Three of the gospel writers grant her the first vision of the risen Jesus. She is asked in all four gospels to relay the

⁸ Luke 8:2.

news of Jesus' resurrection to the other disciples (if one includes the Markan appendix). With mother Mary she is one of the only two persons identified as a witness to the crucifixion in each account. In contrast, the tradition of her being possessed by seven demons is found in only two of the gospels, Luke and Mark, and in the latter only in the appendix. Luke, as we saw, glosses over Mary Magdalene's role at the crucifixion, so we should hold the tradition of the seven demons as potentially a politically motivated creation of the Lucan author.

This Mary Magdalene became conflated with other women from the canonical gospels within Christian memory. Specifically, she came to be associated with women who anointed Jesus. Accounts of this anointing are as contradictory as those concerning the resurrection. Mark and Matthew preserve a tradition wherein Jesus' head is anointed with pure "oil of nard" in the town of Bethany (Mark 14:3-9; Matthew 26:6-13). The woman who anoints him remains unnamed. John tells the story of a woman who anoints Jesus' feet with perfume (John 12:1-8). The woman who anoints his feet is called Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha of Bethany in John 11:1. Luke 7:36-50 contains the story of an unnamed woman who was a sinner (ἁμαπτωλός, *amaptolos*) who took the ointment within an alabaster jar and anointed his feet with it and her tears (Luke 7:36-39). She then wipes his feet with her hair. Jesus forgives her of her sins, because "she loved [him] much" (Luke 7:47).

It is not at all clear at what point these distinct traditions – Mary Magdalene as demon-possessed, witness of the resurrection, the one who anoints Jesus, and the sinner who "loved him much" – became conflated. It is likely that the initial reason for this conflation would have stemmed from Mary Magdalene's role in the resurrection accounts. Her trek to the tomb would have been understood to prepare the body for burial. It would have been easy, then, to confuse this Mary Magdalene who sought to prepare the body for burial with the unnamed woman (or Mary from Bethany) who anointed Jesus in advance of his death.

What we can say with certainty is that by the 6th century this conflation became the official memory within the Catholic Church. In his 33rd homily, Pope Gregory the Great gave authoritative sanction to this confusion: "she whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary, we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected according to Mark. And what did these seven devils signify, if not all the vices."⁹ That is, Mary Magdalene's seven demons were equated with seven vices, as suggested in the unnamed sinner of Luke. The result of such an equation is that Mary Magdalene as the apostle to the apostles and primary witness to

⁹ Pope Gregory the Great, *Homily XXXIII*, (PL 76:1239-40). Quoted from Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor*, 96.

the resurrection falls under erasure. Whatever power might be found in her memory is undermined by her sinful nature. No similar tradition exists about the male disciples, after all. And it is from here that even the reverent memory of Mary as the penitent sinner arises. She is celebrated for being healed and turning to Jesus, letting go of her previous, sinful ways to follow him.

Mary Magdalene in the Nag Hammadi Codices and Berlin Codex¹⁰

Newly rediscovered Coptic literature preserves what April DeConick calls “alternative” and “counter” memories that persisted in the early Christian communities.¹¹ In texts such as *The Gospel of Thomas*, *The Gospel of Philip*, *The Dialogue of the Savior*, and *The Gospel of Mary*, Mary Magdalene is not a penitent sinner. She is a disciple whose status is elevated above the others, a woman privileged by Jesus, a leader, and even Jesus’ companion.

The Dialogue of the Savior (NHC III,5) and *The Gospel of Thomas* both bear witness to the encratic views of second century Syrian communities.¹² Here, Mary is upheld as a paradigm of women who have practiced chastity and therefore “became male.”¹³ In *The Dialogue of the Savior*, Mary Magdalene, Judas (Thomas), and Matthew are in dialogue with “the Lord.” The text is a series of brief questions and answers. When asked by Judas “how should we pray?,” the Lord tells him to “pray in the place where there is no woman” (NHC III, 5.144.16). This is not a comment on females not having a place in the church. It is instead a reflection of the encratite practices and suggestion that the works of femininity (child-bearing) will be rendered unnecessary.

Similarly, in *The Gospel of Thomas* Mary Magdalene is one of the disciples who asks questions of the living Jesus along with Thomas, Simon Peter, and Matthew.¹⁴ In the final saying, Simon Peter suggests to Jesus that Mary Magdalene should be sent away because women are not worthy of eternal life. Jesus responds that he will make her male, “so that she too may become a living spirit (οὐρανῶν ἐκόνε) resembling you males” (NHC II,2.51.22-23). This saying

¹⁰ For other accounts of Mary Magdalene in the Nag Hammadi Codices, see: DeConick, *Holy Misogyny*, 129-146; Schaeberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, 121-203; de Boer, *Mary Magdalene: Beyond the Myth*, 64-117; Idem,

¹¹ DeConick, *Holy Misogyny*, 129.

¹² Ibid, 137-139.

¹³ See *Gospel of Thomas* logion 114.

¹⁴ Mary is mentioned in logia 21 and 114. However, many times in *The Gospel of Thomas* the disciples are mentioned as a group, so it is unclear if these two explicit mentions constitute her only references in the work.

likely reflects a view that Mary, and by extension all women, could be transformed into the primordial, prelapsarian *anthropos* through celibacy.¹⁵

In *The Gospel of Philip* Mary Magdalene is mentioned twice. She is one of the three who always walked with the lord: “Mary his mother and her sister and Magdalene, the one who is called his companion (τετακοινωνος).”¹⁶ Second is the mention rendered famous by *Holy Blood*, *Holy Grail* and *The Da Vinci Code*:

She is the mother of the angels and the partner of. . . Mary Magdalene. . . loved her more than all the other disciples and he used to kiss her. . . many times. The other disciples. . . said to him “why do you love her more than us?” The Savior answered them “why do I not love you like her?” A blind man and one who sees are not different from one another in darkness. When the light comes, then the one who sees will see the light and the one who is blind will remain in darkness (NHC II,3.63.33-64.10).¹⁷

It is not clear whether the second clause, beginning with “a blind man,” is an answer to the Savior’s rhetorical question (“why do I not love you like her?”). If it is intended as such an answer, the status of Mary Magdalene in this text is even more elevated than use of the companion (κοινωνος) suggests. She would then be the only one of the disciples who truly sees the divine light embodied by Christ.

The Gospel of Mary, found in the Berlin Codex (BG 8502), is a badly damaged but priceless text rediscovered in the late 19th century. The first six pages, as well as pages 11 to 14, are missing from a total of 18 pages. *The Gospel of Mary* is always included in the major editions of the Nag Hammadi Library despite being found in a separate codex half a century earlier.¹⁸ In it, Mary Magdalene is identified as the disciple who comforts the other disciples as they mourn and become disillusioned after Jesus’ death (BG 9.5-11). Peter notes that the Savior loved her more than other women and told her things in secret that he did not share with the other disciples (BG 10.1-9). Jesus teaches Mary the epistemology of religious visions (they are seen with the mind which is between the soul and spirit).

¹⁵ For fuller treatment of this, see DeConick, *Holy Misogyny*, 135; Idem, *The Original Gospel of Thomas in Translation*, 297.

¹⁶ NHC II,3 59.6-11.

¹⁷ ΝΤΟΣ ΤΕ ΤΗΑΑ[Υ ΝΝΑΓ]ΓΕΛΟΣ ΔΥΩ [Τ]ΚΟΙΝΩΝΟΣ ΝΠΣ[...ΜΑ]ΡΙΑ ΤΗΑΓ[ΔΑ]ΛΗΝΗ ΝΕΡΕ Π[.....ΜΕ]ΝΜΟ[Σ Ν]ΡΟΥΟ ΔΜΜΑΘΗΤΗΣ ΤΗΡΟΥ ΔΥΩ ΝΕΦΑΣΠΑΖΕ ΜΜΟΣ ΑΤΕΣ[.....ΝΡΑΖ] ΝΣΟΠ’ ΑΠΚΕΣΕΠΕ ΜΜΑΘΗΤΗΣ. . . .ΕΡΟ. . . .ΜΑ ΠΕΧΑΥ ΝΑΥ ΧΕ ΕΤΒΕ ΟΥ ΚΜΕ ΜΜΟΣ ΠΑΡΑΡΟΝ ΤΗΡΗΝ ΑΦΟΥΩΩΒ ΝΒΙ ΠΣΩΤΗΡ ΠΕΧΑΥ ΝΑΥ {ΠΕΧΑΥ ΝΑΥ} ΧΕ ΕΤΒΕ ΟΥ ΤΜΕ ΜΜΩΤΗΝ ΑΝ ΝΤΕΣΖΕ ΟΥΒΛΛΕ ΜΗ ΟΥΑ ΕΦΝΑΥ ΕΒΟΛ ΕΥΖΗ ΠΚΑΚΕ ΜΠΕΣΝΑΥ ΣΕΩΟΒΕ ΕΝΟΥΕΡΗΥ ΑΝ ΖΟΤΑΝ ΕΡΩΑ ΠΟΥΟΕΙΝ ΕΙ’ ΤΟΤΕ ΠΕΤΝΑΒΟΛ’ ΦΝΑΝΑΥ ΕΠΟΥΟΕΙΝ ΔΥΩ ΠΕΤΟ ΒΒΛΛΕ ΕΦΝΑΩΩ ΖΗ ΠΚΑΚΕ. Translation mine.

¹⁸ *The Gospel of Mary* is found in every edition of *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, as well as *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, *The Other Bible*, *The Gnostic Bible*, *The Complete Gospels*, and *A New New Testament*. It is not reproduced in Bentley Layton’s *The Gnostic Scriptures* or *The Five Gospels*.

After several missing pages, we join Mary's already in-progress account of the soul's journey through the heavens, as taught to her by the Savior (BG 15.1-17.7). Andrew dismisses the idea the Savior taught her such things because they are too strange. Peter is more hostile: "did he really speak with a woman without our knowledge and not openly? Are we to turn about and all listen to her? Did he prefer her to us?"¹⁹ Mary weeps and asks Peter why she would contrive what she has said. Levi brushes Peter aside as "hot-tempered" and reminds him that the Savior "loved her more than us" (BG 18.8-15).

Mary Magdalene in Scholarship

The potential of these newly translated Coptic texts to speak to contemporary feminist concerns in America was embraced by scholars. The contrast between traditional memory, where Mary Magdalene is a falsely-accused prostitute and mis-remembered penitent, and these newly discovered memories, where she is the companion of the Savior and the leader of the apostles, is one that is tailor-made for contemporary feminist readers to key into for a critique of patriarchy in the church. The penitent prostitute in many ways represents the sexualized, inferior, and dangerous projections women have suffered from men for centuries. The Mary Magdalene found in the Coptic texts better lends herself to political feminist concerns: power, equal rights, economic agency, and even the embrace of feminine sexuality as healthy, rather than evil. As such, the rediscovered portrayals of Mary Magdalene in the Nag Hammadi Codices and Berlin Codex provide powerful new material for the dialectic of the past with the present.

In this section I will not be recapitulating the work of the many scholars who have reconstructed Mary Magdalene from the sources at hand.²⁰ Rather, I am concerned with how the scholars who are doing this work have explicitly keyed their historical work to contemporary issues in political feminism and the place of women in the church (Catholic, Protestant, or other). What this shows is that while historical scholarship produced by academics must be reviewed and judged for its rigor, these books are *at the same time* revising the Christian memory with a view to impacting the contemporary world. This section closes with a close-reading of the life and work of Jane Schaberg whose works, especially *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, I

¹⁹ *The Gospel of Mary*, BG 17.5-22.

²⁰ see: DeConick, *Holy Misogyny*; Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*; Tuckett, *The Gospel of Mary*; de Boer, *Mary Magdalene: Beyond the Myth*; Idem, *The Gospel of Mary*; Brock, *First Apostle*; Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved*; Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: The Essential History*.

find to be the most nuanced and powerful of the group. At the same time (and not coincidentally), Schaberg's life shows all the signs of estrangement from the Christian faith, symbolic loss, and a tremendous yearning to use her historical scholarship in order to reattach to the Catholic tradition.

Keying in scholarship on Mary Magdalene

Elizabeth Schlüssler-Fiorenza's *In Memory of Her* is a true watershed book. In it, Fiorenza offers a program to reconstruct Christian origins from a feminist perspective. Her theological reconstruction posits that Judaism and Christianity have been andro-centric and patriarchal throughout most of their histories. Sexism and oppression are embedded in their scriptures, institutionalized in their synagogues and churches, and reified in their moral codes.²¹ Recognition of oneself as a Christian woman brings about a diachronic identity with the oppressed women through time: "Rather than *abandon* the memory of our foresisters' sufferings and hopes in our common patriarchal Christian past, Christian feminists *reclaim* their sufferings and struggles in and through the subversive power of the "remembered past.""²²

It has not always been so, according to Fiorenza. The original community united around Jesus of Nazareth was a "discipleship of equals."²³ It provides a safe space for women who felt oppressed by the patriarchal ethos of the Greco-Roman world to develop their own agency, serve in leadership roles, and become religious missionaries and prophets. Traces of this egalitarianism remain in the Pauline letters (e.g., Galatians 3:28, 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and 12:13). However, the androcentric imagination has been active through every subsequent stage of the tradition: in oral memory, written texts, the organization of the Roman Catholic church, and in canon formation. According to Fiorenza, a feminist Christian history therefore has to be alert for such traces, and must try to uncover the roles of women beneath the layers of androcentric selection, language, and theology. This reconstructed history will be a history of women's struggles for liberation within biblical religion.²⁴

For the purposes of this dissertation, it must be noted that Fiorenza does not engage the texts of the Nag Hammadi Library very deeply. For her, texts such as *The Gospel of Mary* provide evidence groups continued to recognize women as leaders in the church into the second

²¹ Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 20.

²² Ibid, 31.

²³ Ibid 35.

²⁴ Ibid 351.

century, *pace* the *Apostolic Church Order* that argues for the exclusion of women from the priesthood.²⁵ *The Gospel of Thomas* reflects the debate between groups that identified with Mary and Peter, respectively. As regards *The Gospel of Philip*, Fiorenza reads the references to Mary Magdalene as the companion of Jesus and the language of the bridal chamber (νυμφών) as making an equation between the Mary as the consort of the earthly Jesus and Sophia and the aeon Christ in the pleroma.²⁶ Earthly marriage becomes the paradigm for heavenly cosmic-divine unification. However, Fiorenza does not see *The Gospel of Philip* as a practical memory to revive for a new Christianity because it entails spiritual elitism.²⁷ It is ultimately psychological and individualistic, not communal. And ultimately, the conjoining of the bride and bridegroom is not a meeting of equals, but a subordination of the feminine principle to the masculine.

Fiorenza's ultimate goal of *In Memory of Her* is to help resurrect what she sees as the original, egalitarian *ekklesia* of the community around Jesus. This *ekklesia* was founded on the experience of God's presence among one another and through one another, not a belief, a rite, or a scripture. More specifically, she intends her book as a call for the *ekklesia of women* as a new model of Catholic church.²⁸ This revived model is based on the principles of commitment, accountability, and solidarity in order to liberate others from "structural sin and alienation of sexism. . . it rejects the idolatrous worship of maleness and articulates the divine image in female human existence and language."²⁹ In other words, it is a church that is at one and the same time: a) the original Christianity; b) a feminist Christianity; and c) critical of the ways in which Catholic tradition developed in a patriarchal direction.³⁰

Perhaps no book has been as influential upon feminist historical-criticism of the Bible. I have not found a book that claims to be feminist historical-criticism that does not cite Fiorenza in its bibliography. Unsurprisingly, then, the slew of Mary Magdalene offered a similar dialectic of the past with the present: the feminist-historical revision at the beginning, with a call for what this revised history could mean for the present. I present the dialectic as found in works from Ann Brock, Susan Haskins, April DeConick, and Jane Schaberg, but many others could be included.³¹

²⁵ Ibid, 51.

²⁶ Ibid 274.

²⁷ Ibid 275.

²⁸ Ibid 349.

²⁹ Ibid 346.

³⁰ Ibid, 351.

³¹ King, *The Gospel of Mary of Magdala*; de Boer, *The Mary Magdalene Cover-Up*; Idem, *Mary Magdalene: Beyond the Myth*.

Ann Brock's *Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority*, grew out of her dissertation written at Harvard under the direction of Karen King, Helmut Koester, and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. In it she makes the most detailed case I am aware of for expanding the category of "apostle" in the early Christian community. She argues to be an apostle was a claim to having borne witness to a resurrection appearance of Jesus. This is why we see such debates over the veracity of visions between Mary Magdalene and Peter in texts such as the gospels of Thomas and Mary. Petrine tradition led to a more exclusive form of apostolic succession, while texts featuring Mary emphasize her visionary (and therefore apostolic) credentials.³²

Brock notes that an expansion of the category of apostle returns it to its earlier and more inclusive counterpart.³³ Doing so would not simply change history. It could alter the present practices of churches:

Those who oppose the right of women to lead public prayer, to preach, or to be ordained often do so because they claim a lack of precedent. This study calls into question such a perceived lack of precedent by reexamining early Christian definitions of "apostle" and the authority that accompanies a divine commissioning for that purpose. Looking back on the past may help us see with more clarity the possibilities for the future.³⁴

Susan Haskin's popular *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* is primarily a history of western art featuring Mary Magdalene. Nevertheless, to chart the full genealogy of Magdalene, Haskins turns to the Nag Hammadi Codices and the New Testament. She determines that Mary Magdalene was the "chief female disciple, apostle to the apostles, and first witness of the resurrection."³⁵ For Haskins, recognition of Mary's original status requires a full-scale revision of the Church of Rome:

Mary Magdalen has, like the women she represents, been the scapegoat of the ecclesiastical institution, manipulated, controlled and, above all, misrepresented. . .the resistance to the idea of women priests derives from deeply entrenched response, conditioned by centuries of dogma which have fashioned the image of Virgin Mary. It is perhaps time to recognize the true feminine model, one which, according to the gospels,

³² Ibid, 1-18 and 161-176.

³³ Brock, *The First Apostle*, 173.

³⁴ Ibid, 174.

³⁵ Haskins, *Mary Magdalen*, 392.

embodies strength, courage and independence, all feminine qualities which the Church has attempted to suppress.³⁶

Finally, April DeConick's *Holy Misogyny: Why the Sex and Gender Conflicts in the Early Church Still Matter* looks back to Christian origins to answer a series of gender-oriented questions one might ask in the present.³⁷ In addition to the role and memory of Mary Magdalene, *Holy Misogyny* covers the exclusion and erasure of the feminine God, the rise of chastity as a Christian ideal, and the disappearance of female leadership in the church. DeConick concludes that the misogynist positions that came to rule in theology, scripture, and church organization all stem from a conception "of the female body that made it a *naturally* deficient body, even subhuman."³⁸ To have authority in the early church, women either needed to become male or a third gender, the hermaphrodite – no longer females.³⁹ The deficient view of the female body is traced back to Eve's creation from Adam and her subsequent role in the Fall. In other words, the misogyny that has been enshrined in church tradition is sourced from the female (Eve's) own actions (eating of the tree of knowledge).⁴⁰ By extension, the masculine imagination of the female body in the ancient world has led to the exclusion of women from leadership positions in major institutions like the Roman Catholic Church and Southern Baptist tradition. So long as the traditional origin story that enshrines women's subordination is the foundation of traditional churches, DeConick concludes, there will be no true equality.⁴¹

Jane Schaberg

Jane Schaberg (1938-2012) served as Professor of Religious Studies and Women's Studies at University of Detroit Mercy, a Catholic University, from 1977 until 2010. A lifelong Catholic herself, Schaberg belonged to the Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (a religious community of Catholic women founded in France after the Revolution) but renounced her vows in the early 1980's. Schaberg remained an advocate for pro-choice abortion rights and was one of the 97 Catholic theologians who signed the "A Catholic Statement on Pluralism and Abortion"

³⁶ Ibid, 393.

³⁷ The chapter titles are quite explicit: 1) Where did God the mother go?; 2) Why was the spirit neutered?; 3) Did Jesus think sex is a sin?; 4) Did Paul silence women?; 5) Is marriage a sin?; 6) Is marriage salvation?; 7) Once a woman, always a woman?; 8) How do we solve a problem like Maria? DeConick, *Holy Misogyny*, vii-viii.

³⁸ DeConick, *Holy Misogyny*, 147.

³⁹ Ibid, 81-82, 135-138, 148.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 149.

⁴¹ "As long as the Bible's story of the subjugation of woman is viewed as God's deserved decree laid upon all women for all time, there can be no liberation. How much longer must women suffer the dreadful and damnin consequences of the ancient male imagination, which valorized the male body while it vulgarized the female, because the Bible tells us so?" DeConick, *Holy Misogyny*, 153-154.

published in the New York Times.⁴² Although she did not pursue feminist studies during her doctoral work at Union Theological Seminary, she did come under the influence of Elisabeth Schlüssler-Fiorenza soon thereafter. All of her major works are feminist in orientation.

In her first book, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus*, Schaberg argues that the stories of the virgin birth in Matthew and Luke show evidence of an earlier, startling tradition: that Mary was seduced and raped, possibly by a Roman centurion, and that Jesus of Nazareth may have been the fruit of this act.⁴³ Matthew 1:1-17 alludes to this tradition through the matrilineal genealogy of Jesus (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bethsheba, and Mary). Each of these women suffered sexually in some way, but their child would ultimately become a powerful figure. As such, Schaberg argues, Matthew hints at the illegitimacy of Jesus but also draws attention to the fact this illegitimacy does not discredit the possibility he could be the Messiah. On Schaberg's reading, understanding mother Mary as having been raped leads to a profound theological point. Her story becomes a model of transformation and liberation for women who had been marginalized by rape, oppression, and violence.

Popular reception of *The Illegitimacy of Jesus* was intense. As she recounts in her article "A Feminine Experience of Historical Jesus Scholarship" and several interviews, Schaberg became the object of public opprobrium on account of *The Illegitimacy of Jesus*.⁴⁴ University of Detroit Mercy received over 700 angry phone calls. As she recounts, "many of the calls to me were hostile. They expressed religious outrage at my ideas, and called me whore, feminazi, queen of crapola, pseudo-intellectual, delusional, bitch, blasphemer, heretic, spiritual cancer, satanic, lesbian, and sicko."⁴⁵ Callers and letter writers demanded Schaberg be fired or step down as chair of the Department of Religious Studies. She received death threats. The archdiocese of Detroit went on the offensive against her views in Catholic periodicals, on television, and in the pulpits.⁴⁶ The University purportedly lost over 1 million dollars in donations. University officials noted that they could not fire her (after all, she had tenure), but otherwise distanced themselves as much as possible from her views.

Little wonder that Schaberg felt alienated from the Catholic Church. When asked in 2012 if she still saw herself as a Catholic, she responded:

⁴² The full page ad asserted that there were a range of opinions on abortion within the Catholic church that needed to be recognized. See "A Catholic Statement on Pluralism and Abortion," Oct 7, 1984.

⁴³ Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus*.

⁴⁴ Schaberg, "A Feminine Experience of Historical Jesus Scholarship"; Mitchell, "An Interview with Jane Schaberg"; Mitchem, "An Interview with Jane Schaberg."

⁴⁵ Schaberg, "A Feminine Experience," 149.

⁴⁶ Ibid 154. The periodical in question is *The Michigan Catholic*.

Yes, I identify myself as a Catholic, but I rarely attend any services because I find them insulting and/or boring. I am and have been for years on the private secret list of those not allowed to speak in catholic institutions. . . .this is a sadness to me as I come to the end of my life. I would have like to contribute to the catholic church – if only as an irritant – and I would like my friends to have a memorial service at the church near me which has great stained glass, or some church.⁴⁷

The *pathos* of this statement is tangible. Schaberg's identification with the Catholic tradition is in conflict with her intellectual integrity ("insulting and/or boring,") and academic freedom ("private secret list"). Her options for emotional attachment to the tradition are limited. She worries that she will not be allowed a memorial service in a Catholic Church.⁴⁸ In short, Schaberg's "radical" feminist theological views left her (in the term she adopts from writer Virginia Wolff) an "Outsider" to the tradition she loves.⁴⁹

As we turn to *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, Schaberg's conflicted status within the Catholic tradition – and *why* her status is conflicted – must be kept in mind. The Mary Magdalene she "resurrects" in this book is one capable not just of representing female authority, but deconstructing the source of patriarchal authority the Catholic Church is founded upon.

Counter-Memory

Schaberg organizes her study as an excavation of the Mary Magdalene of history from the rubble of memory. Beginning with a recognition of the roles Mary Magdalene is playing within the contemporary world (this book was published during the height of *The Da Vinci Code* phenomenon), Schaberg digs through a neglected archaeological site in Magdala, the representations of Mary Magdalene as the penitent prostitute or lover of Jesus in contemporary film, and the conflations and distortions of her memory throughout the Middle Ages before settling into an examination of the evidence from the NHC and *The Gospel of Mary*. From there she proceeds to the canonical gospels and a reconstruction of tradition(s) of Mary that the authors may have been drawing upon and writing against.

Schaberg's Mary Magdalene is as unconventional and challenging as her "illegitimate Jesus." She reads John 20:11-18, where Mary Magdalene speaks with the resurrected Jesus, as an

⁴⁷ Mitchell, "An Interview with Jane D. Schaberg," 69.

⁴⁸ According to her New York Times obituary, her memorial service was held at Christ Church, a local Episcopalian Church. The obituary in the Detroit Free Press contains no mention of her memorial.
<http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/nytimes/obituary.aspx?pid=157339331>

⁴⁹ Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, 21.

“imaginative reuse” of 2 Kings 2, where Elijah is understood to pass the mantle of prophecy to Elisha in his ascension. The lynchpin of her argument is John 20:17. As Mary reaches out to touch Jesus, he says “do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to my Father. But go to my brothers, and say to them I am ascending (ἀναβαίνω, *anabaino*, first person present singular) to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”⁵⁰ The present tense “I am ascending” indicates to Schaberg a possible reference to Elijah’s ascension in 2 King 2. There, after Elisha asks Elijah for a “double share of his spirit,” Elijah tells him “if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you.”⁵¹ Elisha subsequently watches Elijah ascend, tears his cloak in two, and dons the mantle of Elijah, thereby stepping into his role as prophet.⁵² Like Elisha before her, Mary watches the prophet (Jesus) “ascending.”

Reading the appearance of the resurrected Jesus to Mary Magdalene as an allusion to Elijah-Elisha further illuminates John 20 for Schaberg.⁵³ The low Christology in this passage (Mary calls Jesus “Rabbouni!”) parallels Elisha’s use of “master” in 2 King 2:16. Mary being told not to hold or cling to Jesus is seen to parallel Elisha’s refusal to depart from Elijah. In 2 King 2, as in John 20, there is only one witness to the one “ascending.” The motif of seeking is noted by Schaberg as crucial in both texts (Mary seeks Jesus, while fifty men seek for Elijah for 3 days in 2 Kings 2:16-18). Finally, and most importantly, if these allusions are accepted, then Jesus’ appearance to Mary and command to go to the brothers and speak of his resurrection functions as a transmission of the prophetic office to her.⁵⁴ Like Elisha, seeing Jesus ascend Mary would be understood to have received a “double share” of his spirit.

The implication is clear to Schaberg: “Mary Magdalene can be considered a – or the – founder of Christianity, if one wants to use such a term; that she was ‘a creator of the Christian belief in the resurrection,’ and has a better claim than Paul to ‘the first great interpreter of Jesus.’”⁵⁵ This is a “dangerous memory,” or to return to my terms, a counter-memory.⁵⁶ Schaberg here has hypothesized a tradition that would lead to a radical recalibration of the Roman-Catholic canon, organization, and politics. The church would need to be reconfigured around the authority of Mary Magdalene, not Peter or Paul.

⁵⁰ Translation mine. The reference to *anabaino* is in Schaberg, *Resurrecting Mary Magdalene*, 304.

⁵¹ This is Schaberg’s translation in *Resurrecting Mary Magdalene*, 304-305.

⁵² Schaberg notes that a mantle of animal skins was often worn by prophets. See 1 King 19:13, et al. Schaberg, *Resurrecting Mary Magdalene*, 305.

⁵³ Tracked in Schaberg, *Resurrecting*, 314-317.

⁵⁴ Schaberg highlights further allusions between John and the Elijah-Elisha stories on Ibid 339.

⁵⁵ Schaberg, *Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, 303. The quotes are to (first) MacDonald, *Early Christian Women*, 124 and (second) to Chilton, *Resurrection in the Gospels*, 4.217.

⁵⁶ *ibid*, 350.

Why, then, did this tradition get submerged in the canonical gospels, and where do we find survivals of this tradition? Mary Magdalene's enormous import to the early Jesus movement and its succession help Schaberg to better understand her portrayal in the gospels. John includes the tradition but then ignores Mary Magdalene to focus on Jesus' appearance to the disciples, particularly Peter and The Beloved Disciple.⁵⁷ Had the narrative ended with Jesus' command to Mary it would have been clear he has invested his authority in her. In Matthew and Luke the women are called to tell the apostles, but Jesus commissions the male apostles to go forth and "make disciples of all nations."⁵⁸ In Schaberg's estimation, the story of Mary Magdalene having "seven demons" that needed to be exorcised in Mark 16:9 and Luke 8:2 might well be "a trace of early polemics against what was regarded as her heresy, and hence her authority."⁵⁹ This story sought to discredit Mary Magdalene's speech, teaching, and memory. The later conflation of Mary Magdalene with the repentant woman (prostitute) of Luke 7:36-50 made explicit a relationship between madness, evil, and feminine sexuality, and that the only way for this woman to return to the church is through repentance "as a paradigm for the saved."⁶⁰

Fortunately, the more positive tradition of Mary Magdalene survived in Gnostic and apocryphal literature, most clearly *The Gospel of Mary*. Schaberg identifies a nine-point profile of Mary that is found in pieces throughout a variety of texts (e.g., *The Gospel of Thomas*, *The Gospel of Phillip*, *Dialogue of the Savior*, *Pistis Sophia*) and completely in *The Gospel of Mary*. These are: 1) Mary is prominent among the followers of Jesus; 2) she is a woman within a textual world of androcentric and patriarchal ideology; 3) she is a bold speaker; 4) she plays a leadership role; 5) she is a visionary; 6) she is praised for her superior understanding; 7) she is identified as the intimate companion of Jesus; 8) she is opposed by one or more male disciples; 9) she is defended against these disciples.⁶¹ *Gospel of Thomas* 114, for instance, shows Peter urging Jesus not to preach to women. In *Gospel of Phillip* 63:33 she is called the "companion" of Jesus. In the *Pistis Sophia* Mary asks the majority of questions to the resurrected Jesus.

In *The Gospel of Mary* all elements of the profile are present. She is identified as the woman Jesus loved more than any other and the one whom he shared secret wisdom with (*Gospel of Mary* 10.2-6). Mary has a vision of Jesus and of her soul's ascent through the spheres

⁵⁷ "The Gospel is completely silent about the disciples' reception of her proclamation. This silence dismantles her authority and makes her report "superfluous and abortive." Schaberg, *Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, 319.

⁵⁸ Matthew 28:18-19. In Luke 24:4-10 three women (Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the Mother of Jesus) are told by an angel to inform the disciples Jesus will be returning. Schaberg, *Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, 347.

⁵⁹ Ibid 77.

⁶⁰ Ibid 80-82 and 189.

⁶¹ Ibid, 129.

(GosMary 10.10-22 and 15.1-17.5). Andrew dismisses Mary's knowledge derived from vision as "strange ideas" (GosMary 17.15). And Peter questions aloud "Did he really speak *with a woman* without our knowledge and not openly? Are we to turn about and all listen to her? Did he prefer her to us?"⁶² Levi comes to her defense: "surely the Savior knows her very well. That is why he loved her more than us."⁶³

The Gospel of Mary, according to Schafer, contains the closest approximation of the traditional Mary Magdalene that was silenced by John and disfigured in the memory of the apostles. This approximation tells us quite a bit about the early Christian community. It reflects the presence of visionary practices that Jesus himself may have practiced and passed along to his disciples.⁶⁴ Jesus praises Mary for her capacity as a visionary. Furthermore, onn Schafer's reading, the author of *Gospel of Mary* has inserted a sophisticated gender critique into the text. Peter identifies humans with their body, male or female, and therefore identifies with the world of matter. He is deceived. Mary, by contrast, exemplifies the "perfect humanity" that joins all persons together. She exemplifies both male and female gender characteristics.⁶⁵ She has not been "made male" as in the *Gospel of Thomas*. Instead, "masculinities and femininities are in the process of deconstructing here."

Meaning of Memory

In terms of the dialectic of the past with the present, the dangerous memory of Mary Magdalene outlined by Schaberg has the potential in her view to revise the Christian tradition. When Mary Magdalene was lost, so too was Jesus' true message. Jesus' true vision (which she calls *basileia*, or Kingdom) is an apocalyptic mysticism whose mission was to help the oppressed of all nationalities, ethnicities, genders and religions.⁶⁶ The *basileia* she finds is explicitly keyed to the present, as discussed below. The renewed status of Mary would oblige the Catholic Church to open positions of leadership to females and to recognize that dissent and debate were part of the most primitive community. Through historical revisioning of Mary, Schaberg is writing a place for women like herself who have come to feel they do not belong to contemporary Catholicism.

⁶² *Gospel of Mary* 17.18-21.

⁶³ *Gospel of Mary* 18.12-15.

⁶⁴ Schaberg, *Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, 173-174.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 184.

⁶⁶ Schaberg, *Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, 348.

The true nature of Jesus' *basileia* (kingdom) movement was, for Schafer, lost with the true memory of Mary Magdalene. As she characterizes it, the *basileia* movement was egalitarian, apocalyptic, mystical, and political. It was egalitarian insofar as women as well as men were full members, active participants, and regarded themselves as created and elected equally.⁶⁷ Jesus was not a feminist in the contemporary sense, but neither was he sexist or misogynist. The *basileia* movement was apocalyptic insofar as they envisioned a new creation and a new order. Rome would be torn asunder, and the oppressed would be freed and made well. Until the eschaton it was the duty of this movement to work with and for the oppressed vis-à-vis the political regime. Last, it was mystical insofar as Jesus taught those in the movement practiced visionary techniques that would later inform Merkabah and Hekhaloth mysticism, that is, a Jewish visionary mysticism that featured visionary experiences of Ezekiel's chariot or ascent to see the throne of YHVH.⁶⁸ Crucially, Schaberg does not understand this mysticism as a technique for individual salvation. It is a "corporate mysticism" engineered to make contact with the kingdom and help manifest it on earth.⁶⁹

Clearly, the *basileia* movement is keyed by Schaberg to her own concerns political and economic views. Schaberg considers herself lucky to teach in a richly diverse city, "embedded in experiences of the deep and tangled structures of racism, sexism, poverty, classism, colonialism, and the despair and courage displayed by those whom these structures have enmeshed."⁷⁰ In essence, her classrooms showcase those who have been oppressed, and Schaberg's readings and teachings suggest how ancient Christian literature can be used as a tool of resistance. Schaberg's *basileia* is a liberation theology and social critique.

Schaberg's Magdalene Christianity is such a tool of resistance against sexist and patriarchal practices *within* her beloved Catholicism. By turning to *The Gospel of Mary* and a new understanding of the *basileia* movement, "we will be able to imagine more clearly a Magdalene group or groups continuing to exist and create, on the basis of wo/men's insight, revelation, and leadership."⁷¹ In many ways, the opprobrium and sense of alienation Schaberg suffered can be read as the result of a denial of wo/men's insight, revelation, and leadership the Catholic tradition as she understands it. Many who signed the "Catholic Statement on Pluralism

⁶⁷ Ibid 260-21.

⁶⁸ The quintessential work on this Jewish mystical phenomenon is Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines*. Schaberg references visionary experiences in the early *basileia* movement in *Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, 173, 257, and 348.

⁶⁹ Ibid 257.

⁷⁰ Ibid 15.

⁷¹ Ibid 348.

and Abortion” were advocates of women’s leadership within the church, such as Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, Sister Maurine Fiedler, and Schaberg. Her insights into the conception stories in Matthew and Luke arose from feminist philosophy and interpretation. And the dismissal of women’s positions on their own bodies and through their own epistemologies gives lie to the fact the church is at this point truly egalitarian.

Margaret Starbird: Mary Magdalene as Goddess and Bride of Christ

The discovery and publication of the NHC corresponded historically with the rise of Neo-Pagan Goddess religions in the west.⁷² Such religions look to the goddesses of the Near East and Europe – Ishtar, Isis, Diana – as symbols of the Divine Feminine which was lost in the west with the rise of Christianity.⁷³ It is not surprising, then, to find forms of Goddess religion entering into Christianity.⁷⁴ What is surprising is how Mary Magdalene has become the primary symbol of the Christian Goddess. Mary mother of Jesus, Sophia, and Anna all have their devotees, but Mary Magdalene has inspired unparalleled number of goddess groups, ritual manuals, and alternative histories.⁷⁵

⁷² The primary and secondary literature on Goddess religion in the contemporary west is enormous. Works which have been highly influential on the production and practice of contemporary Goddess religion include: Graves, *The White Goddess*; Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Goddess*; Idem, *Earth Magic*; Gimbutas, *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe*; Merlin Stone, *When God was a Woman*; Christ, *The Laughter of Aphrodite*; Sjoo, *The Great Cosmic Mother*. In terms of secondary scholarship, see Pike, *New Age and NeoPagan Religions*, 115-144; Renger, “‘From Aphrodite to Kuan Yin’ – ‘The Tao of Venus’ and its Modern Genealogy: Invoking Ancient Goddesses in Cos(met)ic Acupuncture”; Fehlmann, “Ancient Goddesses for Modern Times or New Goddesses from Ancient Times?”; Tully, “The Artifice of Daidalos: Modern Minoica as Religious Focus in Contemporary Paganism”; Raphael, “Goddess Religion, Postmodern Jewish Feminism, and the Complexity of Alternative Religious Identities”; Jencson, “Neopaganism and the Great Mother Goddess: Anthropology as Midwife to a New Religion.”

⁷³ Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West* vol 1. The growth and influence of goddess religions is the result of multiple streams of influence. Historical-critical research and translation of ancient texts has given greater exposure to these goddesses. The rise of political feminism led many, male and female, to look for a feminine deity. And the fascination with placing the (often invented) origins of one’s religion in the ancient world or before is a characteristic of contemporary alternative religions.

⁷⁴ The scholar who has done the most with this topic is Mary Ann Beavis. See Beavis, *Christian Goddess Spirituality*; Idem, “Mary of Bethany and the Hermeneutics of Remembrance”; Idem, “The Deification of Mary Magdalene”; Idem, “Christian Goddess Spirituality and Theology.”

⁷⁵ For Sophia, see: Powell, *The Sophia Teachings*; Matthews, *Sophia*. On Mary, mother of Jesus as Goddess see: Lambert, *A Mother Goddess for Our Times*; On Anna, see Heartsong, *Anna, Grandmother of Jesus*. Magdalene Circles originated with Margaret Starbird and are now located throughout the country. These circles are informal groups (primarily women) who approach Mary Magdalene as the Christian Goddess. They may use manuals for contacting the goddess, such as: Norton and Starbird, *Fourteen Steps to Awaken the Divine Feminine*; Houston, *Invoking Mary Magdalene*.

In what follows I analyze the works of Margaret Starbird (B: 1942), the leading figure in the Christian-Goddess movement. Starbird's book *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar* was one of Dan Brown's principle sources for *The Da Vinci Code*.⁷⁶ Recent editions of the book carry even the stamp "As featured in the Da Vinci Code!" with a blurb from Dan Brown himself.⁷⁷ Starbird has written five books on Mary Magdalene.⁷⁸ She is a Roman Catholic who received a Master's Degree in Comparative Literature from the University of Maryland and later attended Vanderbilt Divinity School (1988-89), though there she did not pursue a degree.⁷⁹

Starbird's life and work bring the interlocking analyses of this dissertation – symbolic loss, politics of memory, and the renewed attachment to the Christian symbolic found in the NHC – into high relief. She has written extensively about the faith-shattering experience of reading Lincoln et al's *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*.⁸⁰ The idea Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene, and that the church had covered it up, sent Starbird into a nervous breakdown. She spent the next several years researching the Magdalene legends, paintings, and texts mentioned in *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, the result of which is *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar* – a completely revised tradition of Mary Magdalene as Bride of Jesus and forgotten Divine Feminine. And Starbird sees this revised image of Magdalene as the key to healing not just herself, but Catholicism and western culture as a whole.

Symbolic Loss

In 1985, Starbird checked out *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* from her local library in Virginia. The idea the Roman Catholic church she had belonged to her whole life might have been hiding a secret marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene dissolved her sense of identity: "I was not merely shocked by this suggestion, I was shattered."⁸¹ She recommended the book to a dear friend so she could discuss the ideas in it. Starbird and her friend's (Mary) shared response is a profound and telling statement of symbolic loss:

⁷⁶ Starbird's *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar* and *The Goddess in the Gospels* are two of the books on Lea Teabing's shelf that he appeals to in order to prove Mary Magdalene's child is the holy grail. Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, 253.

⁷⁷ "Margaret Starbird's work is of particular interest to me because it fuses the diverse fields of symbolism, mythology, art, heraldry, psychology, and gospel history. Her research opens doors for each of us to further explore the rich iconography of our own spiritual history." Found on back blurb of Starbird, *Alabaster Jar*.

⁷⁸ Starbird, *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar*; Idem, *Mary Magdalene: Bride in Exile*; Idem, *The Goddess in the Gospels*; Idem, *Magdalene's Lost Legacy*; Norton and Starbird, *14 Steps for Awakening the Divine Feminine*.

⁷⁹ Access Starbird's biography here: http://www.margaretstarbird.net/margarets_bio.html. The same information is printed in the introductions to most of her books.

⁸⁰ Primarily in Starbird, *The Goddess in the Gospels*, 65-110

⁸¹ Starbird, *Alabaster Jar*, xix.

For both Mary and me, a process of mourning set in during those days in winter of 1986. It was the beginning of a great disillusionment and an enormous loss of our whole system of reality and identity. We could no longer mouth the party line, no longer refrain from questioning, no longer feel comfortable teaching Roman Catholic doctrine to children in religious education classes. The solid rock of Peter's Church on which we had based our lives was crumbling.⁸²

Starbird here has unknowingly utilized the precise technical terms of symbolic loss: mourning, disillusionment, "loss of our whole system of reality and identity." She goes on to describe how she began to feel "sad and dry" when she attended mass or participated in religious rituals. At root was the issue of trust, now lost: "we had trusted them [the Catholic Church] with our lives and our eternal salvation, believing everything they had taught us. And now that trust was shattered."⁸³ This was the "sudden death of [her] own belief system."⁸⁴

Starbird's phase of disillusionment and symbolic loss was as intense as it was profound. Her husband and five children became increasingly worried about her. On December 22, 1986, her husband admitted her to the local hospital.⁸⁵ The doctor admitted her to the mental ward for psychiatric observation and testing. She underwent a CAT scan, an fMRI, and was prescribed anti-anxiety medication. For Starbird, these three days (not coincidentally the three days marking the winter solstice) served as her own "harrowing of hell."⁸⁶ As she puts it, "the mitigating restraints of reason were absent and the bottomless pit of primeval chaos and insanity yawned before me."⁸⁷

In retrospect, however, Starbird sees the harrowing of hell as a necessary phase in the mourning process. In technical terms, it marked the shift from a period of disillusionment and symbolic loss to one where she revised her relationship to the Christian symbolic and achieved new, meaningful attachments. Part of this is mythic identification. The "harrowing of hell" clearly invokes a memory of Jesus. But it also is read to recall the Babylonian goddess Inanna's

⁸² Starbird, *The Goddess in the Gospels*, 69.

⁸³ Ibid, 69.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 81.

⁸⁵ "They were aware that something was radically wrong with me. My driving had been affected by my mental state, and it had become increasingly difficult for me to provide meals on time or even to utter coherent thoughts. My distress for them was making me even more frantic." Starbird, *Godde in the Gospels*, 94.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 97.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 97.

three days hanging on a meathook in the underworld.⁸⁸ She felt overcome by rage, a common symptom of disillusionment.⁸⁹ It felt as though she had been abused her whole life by an oppressor, the Catholic Church she knew and loved. This institution had denied the truth about Jesus and, in the process, ignored the high stature of Mary Magdalene. Worse, they had obscured her high status beneath a tradition that brandished Mary as a whore, a penitent prostitute – anything but the bride of Jesus. Moreover, Starbird felt that her nervous breakdown opened her to new understandings of psychology and symbolism, mind and matter, that she could not have discovered otherwise. Religion was not *just* about belief in a specific, true history now. It was about how the symbols of Jesus and Mary, at once historical and mythical, provided a blueprint for self-realization and understanding. In my words now, Starbird sought re-attachment to the Christian tradition through a new therapeutic and individualized reading of its symbols.

When she was released from the mental ward Starbird began he work on the legend of Mary Magdalene.

Counter-Memory: Mary Magdalene as Bride and Goddess

Starbird turns to the New Testament to begin the process of revising the memory of Mary Magdalene. Her analysis mixes historical-criticism, comparative research, and archetypal psychology in the tradition of Carl Jung.

To understand the allusions being made in the gospels, Starbird argues, we must first understand the goddess religions of antiquity. Influenced by Merlin Stone's *When God was a Woman* and Robert Graves' *The White Goddess*, Starbird asserts that the archaic form of spirituality from 7000-3500 BCE was Goddess oriented.⁹⁰ The ancient near east was matrilineal and centered on the goddess. She marks how early civilizations had temples devoted to these goddesses, such as Isis in Egypt, Asherah in Sumer, and Ishtar in Mesopotamia. As a surrogate of these goddesses, priestesses of the Temple were responsible for anointing the new kings and marrying them in the *hieros gamos* (or holy marriage). The *hieros gamos* legitimize the new king.

The "Indo-Aryan invasions" of 3500 BCE and after led, according to Starbird, to the rise of a supreme male deity "whose anger and wrath must be propitiated."⁹¹ Slowly but irrevocably

⁸⁸ Ibid, 96.

⁸⁹ Homans, *Ability to Mourn*, 149-152; Idem, *Jung in Context*, 50-51.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 36.

⁹¹ Ibid, 37.

the cult of this supreme male deity would eclipse the goddess. However, traces of the goddess religion in Judaism and Christianity can be found in their scriptures. We learn, for instance, that traces of the goddess and *hieros gamos* ritual can be found in the *Song of Songs*: “it is believed that the song was originally a liturgical litany for performance during rites of the Sacred Marriage (the *hieros gamos*).”⁹² In essence, the *Song of Songs* replicates the ceremonies of the *hieros gamos* practiced in regards to other Bride-Bridegroom pairs, such as Isis-Osiris, Ishtar-Dumuzid, or Asherah-Anu.

Starbird argues that references to Mary Magdalene in the New Testament allude to her status as the holy Bride to Jesus of Nazareth’s Bridegroom. First, Starbird identifies Mary sister of Martha who anointed Jesus’ feet (John 11:2-3) with Mary Magdalene possessed by seven demons (Mark 16:9, Luke 8:2). The anointing of Jesus by Mary of Bethany “was similar to the familiar ritual practice of a sacred priestess or temple “prostitute” in the Goddess cults of the Roman Empire anointing a new king.”⁹³ Mary was serving in the role of priestess of the Goddess while anointing Jesus the new king of Israel. According to Starbird, the alabaster jar is an allusion to the containers of unguent used by these temple priestesses. Jesus and Mary, then, enacted the *hieros gamos* ritual.

Starbird also challenges the common notion that Mary was called “Magdalene” to identify her with her supposed home, Magdal. She notes that *Magdal* is translated as “tower” or “watchtower” from the Hebrew.⁹⁴ *Magdal-eder*, or “watchtower of the flock,” is used in Micah 4:8, where “As for you, O *Magdaleder*, watchtower of the flock, O stronghold of the Daughter of Zion! The former dominion will be restored to you; kingship will come to the Daughter of Jerusalem.” Starbird argues that Mary of Bethany could have initially been called Mary the *Magdala-eder* as a way of identifying her with the watchtower of Micah’s prophecy. That is, Mary was guarding the Daughter of Jerusalem – Mary’s child with Jesus – who would help restore the Jewish Kingdom from Jerusalem.

In Starbird’s counter-memory, these allusions would have been understood to those in the tight-knit group of Jesus’ disciples. However, given that Jesus had been crucified, it seemed wise to protect his wife and child from a similar fate. So early oral traditions, according to Starbird,

⁹² Ibid, 41.

⁹³ Ibid, 29. See also, on the nard, “the sacred olive oil was carefully prepared by the priests in the Temple and mixed according to a prescribed recipe with other spices: cinnamon, myrrh, sweet calamus, and cassia. . . the woman of Bethany did not use the sacred oil of the Temple priests. She opened “an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured it on his head” (Mark 14:3-4).” Starbird, *Alabaster Jar*, 40.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 51.

would have spoken in these allusions to protect Mary's identity as wife of Jesus. The child of the Messiah would have posed a political threat. Mary, Joseph of Arimathea, and Lazarus therefore went first to Alexandria (to have the child, Sarah), and then relocated to Gaul.

The marriage of Jesus and Mary provided a prototype to the earliest Christian community would have tried to integrate the God and Goddess in practice. Similarly to that professed by Fiorenza and Schaberg, Starbird avers that the earliest Christian communities were egalitarian. Women had equal status with men. They could preach and lead prayers. Characteristics Starbird identifies with femininity and the Goddess – intuition, equality, relationality, mysticism, *eros* – were preached by Jesus.⁹⁵ After Jesus' death and Mary's departure, however, the early Goddess-orientation of the group would be routinized into creeds, practices, and rules by the all-male leadership. Mary, whose stature as Bride to Jesus was hidden to protect her, would become the victim of a cultural amnesia.

The Nag Hammadi Codices and Berlin Codex serve an important legitimizing function for this memory. Texts such as *The Gospel of Phillip*, *The Gospel of Mary*, and *The Gospel of Thomas* point to the survival of a tradition where Mary Magdalene is the bridegroom, sex is sacred, and intuition and mysticism reign. For Starbird, *The Gospel of Phillip*'s references to Mary Magdalene as “koinonos” and the one Jesus used to “kiss often on the mouth” at the very least show that a tradition where Mary and Jesus fulfilled the archetypal roles of Bride and Bridegroom of the *hieros gamos* survived into the third century.⁹⁶ At most, this reference could indicate the sexual aspect of their relationship, and the text it is in may have been buried to escape the eyes of a patriarchal, ascetic church.⁹⁷ The leitmotif of the “bridal chamber” in the NHC, found in texts such as *The Gospel of Phillip*, *The Exegesis on the Soul*, and many others, indicates to Starbird that the stress on Bride and Bridegroom symbolism clearly differentiated the Gnostic forms of Christianity from the orthodox forms that became Roman Catholicism.⁹⁸

The gospel of *Mary* further indicate how Mary's elevated status was tied into her visionary capacity. Her argument with Peter is read as a battle between left-brained, masculine thinking (“scientifically proved, historically accurate, and concrete”) and right-brained feminine

⁹⁵ “The earliest Christian churches were radically egalitarian, allowing women to speak, to each, to prophesy in their assemblies. We sense that the model for this elevated status of women among the early Christians was Mary Magdalene.” Starbird, *Mary Magdalene, Bride in Exile*, 5.

⁹⁶ Starbird, *Bride in Exile*, 74-75. The Reference is to *The Gospel of Phillip* NHC II,3.63.32-64.10.

⁹⁷ Starbird, *Bride in Exile*, 76-77 and 79-83.

⁹⁸ Starbird, *Alabaster Jar*, 44.

thinking “artist/mystic/visionary”).⁹⁹ The war of words between Peter and Mary, then, is symbolic for debates in the second century Christian communities. Should Christianity be intuitive, mystical, and left-brained? Or should it be organized and routinized in churches?

The burial of the NHC made it clear which side of the tradition, and therefore brain, won. But for Starbird, perhaps the return of these texts from the desert portends a similar return of the Divine Feminine to the Catholic tradition.¹⁰⁰

Meaning of Memory

The counter-memory of Mary Magdalene as the Goddess and Bride to Jesus’ Bridegroom is about much more than restoring historical accuracy for Starbird. Most of the problems with the western world can be attributed to the loss of the Goddess. In other words, Catholicism’s subordination, forgetting, and ultimate misinterpretation of Mary Magdalene is the origin of global warming, political dictatorships, massive wealth inequality, and domestic abuse.¹⁰¹ The return of the Goddess would bring balance and healing to politics and economics, sex and the family, and the psyche.

In terms of politics, Starbird traces the ills of the contemporary age to the male-dominated psyche that led to “power concentrated at the top and the exploited masses imprisoned at the bottom. This is the model for dictatorship and oppression.”¹⁰² “Masculine” economic policies, embodied in neo-liberal forms of capitalism, are seen as the cause of ecological imbalance. Without the feminine divine to reign in masculine aggression, the earth has become a “wasteland” where resources have been overmined, pollution has reached critical levels, and the very equilibrium of the climate has been threatened.¹⁰³

As out in the world, so within the family. For Starbird the elevation of a celibate male god and the celebration of a virgin mother cannot help but lead to filial dysfunction: “imaging a celibate God is bound (*in extremis*) to create a dysfunctional family.”¹⁰⁴ If the divine prototype lacks a female then it is difficult for men to see their wives as equals. Celibate church fathers are guilty, according to Starbird, of alienating future generations of Christians from the feminine

⁹⁹ Starbird, *Bride in Exile*, 77. See also 77, “[Mary Magdalene’s] experience is similar to traditional modes of mystics worldwide who relate to the Divine through dreams, visions, altered consciousness, and other spiritual encounters. Hers is not a rigid faith based on memorized creeds; it is one of direct experiential relationship with the Savior.”

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 78.

¹⁰¹ Starbird, *Bride in Exile*, 143-44; Idem, *Alabaster Jar*, 177.

¹⁰² Starbird, *Alabaster Jar*, 160.

¹⁰³ Starbird, *Alabaster Jar*, 159.

¹⁰⁴ Starbird, *Bride in Exile*, 144.

principle within and the respect of women in the home. And these same fathers rendered celibacy virtuous. Returning Mary Magdalene to her role as Goddess overturns this sexual neurosis: “marriage and sex within marriage are not sins. They are sacraments – signs of God’s presence with us and of God’s creative activity.”¹⁰⁵

Finally, the return of the Goddess works on the inner plane. For Starbird, the feminine characteristics – creative, intuitive knowing, experiential knowledge, mysticism, connectivity, inclusivity, tolerance, emotionality, and acceptance of diversity – all follow once the Goddess returns. These are all characteristics of *eros*, or the feminine archetype, that she hopes will reunite to the *logos*.

To be sure, Starbird’s reconstruction of Mary Magdalene as the divine bride of Jesus and their marriage as a *hieros gamos* is speculative. But it is clear that the form of Christianity that she is trying to construct is one reacting to broader forces in the American context. Sex is not evil – it is sacred. Political, sexual, and economic misogyny are all intertwined, and the feminist movement has had to respond to each of these dimensions. Starbird’s turn to the Goddess as a figure as much within the psyche as outside the self in history has important implications for a pluralistic landscape. By locating religion in the mind, authors like Starbird (or Jung, Freke, Gandy, etc.) attempt to argue that most religions are, at their core, expressions of the same psychological truths. The only exceptions to this rule are seen to be rigidly organized, authoritarian, patriarchal religious structures that elevate political power above the natural psychological transformation. Such a claim is problematic historically. As a religious claim, it is clear evidence Starbird and others like her are trying to bring the Christian symbolic into a larger, pluralistic horizon of reference.

Historical Novels

A historical novel is a work of fiction that is set in historical reality. The author utilizes the time, setting, and characters familiar from cultural memory to spin a tale that may have greater or lesser relationship to the past reconstructed by historians. The genre is distinct from the Lost Gospels genre, analyzed in chapter one, which focuses on the present and concerns the discovery of a relic from the past that, once understood, could lead to an inversion of traditional memory. Historical novels are also distinct from the reception of the NHC in the writings of

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 149.

Bloom, Dick, and Morrison insofar as the latter bring ideas and symbols from these ancient texts into a setting of their choosing. Symbols of Christian memory (such as Jesus and Mary Magdalene) and the setting of the canonical gospels have served as major points of reference for such historical novels.¹⁰⁶

There has been a boom in the publication and popularity of historical novels at the turn of the 21st century. One interpretation of this phenomenon, posited by memory theorist Monica Jansen, is that it is a response to the decline of ideologies and strong certainties in the post-modern west: “[the historical novel] should revisit the past in order to recuperate a collective identity and to enlarge the conscience of one’s present.”¹⁰⁷ That is, the historical novel is a site of memory where authors reimagine and reproduce a past that others can identify with in the absence of a shared, meaningful past. Along these same lines Astrid Eril notes “a look at the actual reading strategies of empirical interpretive communities seems to justify the assumption that the ontological gap between fiction and reality postulated in theory is smoothly overcome in practice, and that literary works shape our ideas about past realities.”¹⁰⁸ In other words, the past as remembered in works of fiction can become as, if not more, real than the historical past for the reader.

The boom in historical novels about Mary Magdalene in the last decades can be understood through both Jansen’s and Eril’s insights. Historical criticism of the New Testament has thoroughly undone any “strong certainties” in memory of early Christianity. These novels, often written from the first-person perspective of Mary herself, give readers an imaginative portal into the (reimagined) Christian past that facilitates the development of a (revised) sense of history. Moreover, the rise of these historical novels coincides precisely with the publication of the Nag Hammadi Library in English and the popularization of feminist philosophies. The Mary Magdalene of memory and the New Testament left much to the imagination. But the NHC and *Gospel of Mary* provided novelists with new fodder – Mary as a visionary, at odds with Peter, and leader of the Apostles. She provided a ready symbol for these novelists to read feminist

¹⁰⁶ The most famous of these is probably Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Other historical novels of Jesus include Mailer, *The Gospel According to the Son* and Caruana, *The Hidden Passion: A Novel of the Gnostic Christ Based on the Nag Hammadi Texts*. Historical novels which center on Mary Magdalene include: Longfellow, *The Secret Magdalene*; Kinstler, *The Moon Under her Feet*; George, *Mary Called Magdalene*; Gunderson-Taylor, *Mary Magdalene*; Wallis-Taylor, *Mary Magdalene: A Novel*; Hunt, *Magdalene*; Little, *Disciple: A Novel of Mary Magdalene*.

¹⁰⁷ Jansen, “History as a Peripheral Event?,” 152.

¹⁰⁸ Eril, *Memory in Culture*, 165.

concerns back into the earliest Christian communities and reimagine what a non-patriarchal form of Christianity would have looked like.

Most historical novels that feature Mary Magdalene have hewn close to the traditional Christian version, with elements of the visionary or apostle added.¹⁰⁹ Margaret George, author of historical novels such as *The Autobiography of Henry VIII* and *The Memoirs of Cleopatra*, wrote such a novel in *Mary Called Magdalene* (2002). In it, Mary is a married woman who suffers from demon-possession and seeks the help of Jesus the healer. Cured, she becomes one of Jesus' first disciples. Mary Magdalene is physically attracted to Jesus but there is no sexual contact, much less a marriage between them.¹¹⁰ Instead, the novel presents the Jesus' death and resurrection as presented in the gospel of John, followed by the major events presented in Acts of the Apostles. The only distinction is that Mary Magdalene is now accepted as one of the apostles alongside Peter, James, and Paul. She is there at the Pentecost and becomes a missionary like Paul and Peter. There is, however, no mention in this novel of an internecine power struggle between Peter and Mary, no visionary ascent, nor any mention of *gnosis*.¹¹¹

The two I have chosen for deeper analysis below are separated from those like *Mary Called Magdalene* in a number of important ways. Both Clysta Kinstler's *The Moon Under her Feet* and Ki Longfellow's *The Secret Magdalene* incorporate much more of the NHC and *Gospel of Mary* into their stories. In so doing, both of these novels create a counter-memory not only of Mary Magdalene, but early Christianity as a whole, that is much more severe and critical than the more traditional fare from George, et al. Moreover, each of them utilizes Mary Magdalene to drastically reimagine the parameters of possible Christian belief. In this, the novels incorporate symbols and ideas from a variety of religions, past and present, into the lives of Mary and Jesus. Much greater emphasis is placed on the idea all humans are fundamentally divine and that this is the message that Mary understood and Peter could not. Finally, both of these novels do more for feminism than offer Mary as an apostolic figure. Each of them depicts Mary in such a way that she deconstructs sex and gender norms of her time and of our own.

The Moon Under her Feet

¹⁰⁹ For instance: Gunderson-Taylor, *Mary Magdalene*; Wallis-Taylor, *Mary Magdalene: A Novel*; Hunt, Magdalene; Little, *Disciple: A Novel of Mary Magdalene*.

¹¹⁰ According to Margaret George, "I assume that Jesus was an attractive person, and it would be unusual if none of his female followers developed heightened feelings for him." George, *Mary Called Magdalene*, 629.

¹¹¹ Mary's visions in this novel are prophecies of future events on earth, such as the fall of the Temple (399), Jesus ministering in a white robe (399), and Peter's death (432). George, *Mary Called Magdalene*.

Clysta Kinstler's *The Moon Under her Feet* (1989, hereafter MUHF) is the first historical novel to rewrite the role of Mary Magdalene with the NHC as primary source material. In it, we are given a first person perspective of the life of Mary (called Mari Anath). Kinstler's novel presents a counter-memory of Mary Magdalene. Mari Anath is High Priestess of Isis, plays the role of Goddess on earth, and is the woman whom Yeshua loves more than any other disciple. The two ultimately wed in the ceremony of the *hieros gamos*.¹¹² Through Mari Anath, we are introduced to a Magdalene who embodies alternative Christian perspectives on the construction of femininity, religious pluralism, sex and eros.

The Mary Magdalene presented in MUHF is a dynamic, vibrant, and complex woman. Mari's story is plotted along the "hero's journey" monomyth as outlined by Joseph Campbell, to whom the book is dedicated.¹¹³ Mari's mother noted the astonishing magical potential of her daughter and therefore turns her over to the Temple of Isis in Jerusalem when she is but five years old. Mari is to become a priestess of Isis. While there she comes under the tutelage of Almah Mari (i.e., mother Mary) who is herself a priestess in training and, later, the High Priestess of Isis, referred to in the novel as a Magdalene.¹¹⁴ At 14 Mari is married off to Herod Antipas's brother, Phillip, and soon gives birth to a daughter (Salome). After living in Phillip's harem for seven years Mari is urged to return to Jerusalem by Almah Mari, Judas-Seth (Yeshua's twin brother), and Miriam (a famous midwife and sorceress). To decide her fate, Mari provokes a venomous snake to bite her and go into a trance. In this trance she gains a vision of the Goddess Isis-Asherah and realizes it is her duty to return.¹¹⁵ Once back, she ascends to the role of High Priestess, or Magdalene.

While in Jerusalem, Mari and Judas-Seth sustain a dalliance that results in the birth of two sons. Mari and Seth do not marry. Herod Antipas, realizing marriage to the High Priestess of Isis would magnify his already considerable power, asks for Mari's hand in marriage. To escape this fate, Mari trains herself to go into a trance wherein her body appears as if dead, while her

¹¹² The story of Isis and Osiris that Kinstler adopts is as follows: Seth, Osiris' brother, traps him in a chest, secures it with molten led, and floats the chest out to sea. Osiris' wife finds it grown into the trunk of a tree. She removes the chest, opens it, and finds Osiris dead. She lays atop his corpse and apparently conceives their son, Horus. Isis hides the chest in a swamp but, to her dismay, Seth discovers it and mutilates the body of Osiris, dispersing his pieces far and wide. See Ruether, *Goddess and the Divine Feminine*, 64-69.

¹¹³ "To Joseph Campbell, Who awakened me to Mythology," Kinstler, *Moon*, unnumbered page. See Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* for the fullest treatment of this monomyth. One can see many of Campbell's stages of the hero's quest in MUHF, including the call, refusal of the call, crossing the threshold, the road of trials, meeting with the goddess, ultimate boon, and magical flight.

¹¹⁴ On the call to adventure, refusal of the call, and supernatural aid, see Campbell, *Hero*, 49-77.

¹¹⁵ On meeting with the Goddess in the hero's journey, see Campbell, *Hero*, 109-120.

soul travels through the underworld.¹¹⁶ When her soul returns to her body, Mary is plagued by seven demons. Yeshua (Jesus of Nazareth) stops in Jerusalem, exorcises the demons from her body, and proposes to her. In the context of the novel, this marriage is far more than a love affair. It is the *hieros gamos*, or holy wedding, where Yeshua and Mari embody the reunion of Osiris and Isis. Yeshua's crucifixion is the final sacrifice to the Goddess – her beloved Isis returned to her after his death and dismemberment in the Egyptian myth.

The memories of Mary Magdalene found in the New Testament, NHC, and BG 8502 are woven into this broader narrative. As regards traditional Christian memory, because of her dalliance with Judas-Seth in the novel she is branded “Babylonian bitch whore!” and “Harlot! Abomination!” by John the Baptist.¹¹⁷ She is sister of Martha and Lazarus.¹¹⁸ Upon meeting Yeshua as an adult, Mari takes an alabaster jar full of myrrh to anoint his feet and wipes them with her own tears and hair (MUHF 221).¹¹⁹ Yeshua exorcises her of the seven demons she brought back after her descent to the underworld (MUHF 224).¹²⁰ She, Peter, and John (understood to be the Beloved Disciple) encounter Yeshua's empty tomb together before she alone meets the resurrected Yeshua (MUHF 290-291).¹²¹

As regards the rediscovered Coptic literature, Kinstler incorporates both direct and indirect allusions. Directly, we see Peter tell Yeshua “women are not worthy of eternal life!” (MUHF 227).¹²² John (not Levi) acknowledges that “Yeshua loved her more than us!” (MUHF 291).¹²³ She becomes the wife (i.e., *koinonos*) of Yeshua (MUHF 266).¹²⁴ More indirectly, Mari is a visionary capable of projecting her soul from her body.¹²⁵ The most prominent example is when Mari goes into a deep trance in order to appear dead so that Herod Antipas will give up his quest to marry her. In this descent she comes across seven gatekeepers and discards elements of her personality at each station, all of which is understood to be a simulation of what occurs to the soul at death (MUHF 183-188).¹²⁶ Significantly, these gatekeepers are not planetary archons.

¹¹⁶ Kinstler, Moon, 183-187.

¹¹⁷ Kinstler, *Moon*, 156.

¹¹⁸ Another Mary is the sister of Martha and Lazarus in John 11:1-3.

¹¹⁹ A woman anoints Jesus' feet with perfume in John 11:1. An unnamed sinner anoints Jesus' feet with her tears in Luke 7:36-50.

¹²⁰ See Luke 8:3 and Mark 16:9.

¹²¹ Utilizing the account of the resurrection found in John 20.

¹²² The reference is to *The Gospel of Thomas* logion 114.

¹²³ The reference is to *The Gospel of Mary*. BG 8502 18.14-15.

¹²⁴ Based in part on the *koinonos* (companion) of *The Gospel of Phillip* NHC II.3, 63.32.

¹²⁵ There are three events where this capacity for OBEs is most prominent: 1) in the mercy killing of her friend Dalia (MUHF 101-105); 2) becoming Mari Anath in the *hieros gamos* ceremony (150-151); and 3) Mari's descent into the underworld (183-188).

¹²⁶ Compare *The Gospel of Mary* BG 8502 15.1-17.7

Instead, they are expressions of Mari's own mind.¹²⁷ Within the novel, afterlife discourse has shifted from cosmology to psychology.

The counter-memory of Mary Magdalene offered in *Moon Under her Feet* defies traditional gender norms. Mari is a bold and powerful leader. As High Priestess she is considered of equal stature to Herod Antipas. She is a sensual, erotic and unapologetic woman. She bears four children from three men (two from Seth-Judas, one a piece from Phillip and Yeshua) and serves as the goddess in the *hieros gamos* ceremony for many others. Unsatisfied by Phillip's lovemaking, Mari masturbates and imagines herself with other men.¹²⁸ Yeshua, himself a virgin, informs Mari that sex with her taught him the holiness of embodiment: "it is you, my priestess, my wise one; who has shown me the sacredness of this flesh. You have made it a temple."¹²⁹ And Mari is painted as an advocate of women's rights, sexual and economic:

Despite my early years as the fifth wife of Philip Herod, I did not share the traditional view that allowed men of economic means multiple marriages and concubines while holding their wives to the strictest chastity. I could never stop speaking against the belief that seduced maidens were no longer fit for proper marriage and must be sold into lifelong servitude.

Through her presentations of Mari, Yeshua, and Judas-Seth, Kinstler also offers an alternative Christian memory that welcomes religious pluralism and hybridity. Not only Mari Anath, but Almah Mari, mother of Yeshua, is identified as the personification of Isis-Asherah – Mari as her dark aspect, Almah as the light. Kinstler quotes the Isis aretology found in Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*, wherein Isis identifies herself as the true Goddess behind every myth.¹³⁰ Yeshua is the personification of Osiris. He spends years training in Egypt, India, and Tibet in order to learn how to control the elements, levitate, and resuscitate the dead (MUHF 155-157). Yeshua even attributes the essence of his gospel, "Paradise is within," to followers of the

¹²⁷ "How had I lost control? In my imagination, I closed my eyes tight, straightened my spine, clenched my fists, and shouted with all my might to the dancing, yammering demons, 'Silence!' Large and small, they shrank back almost comically, falling over one another, clawing at each other in the flight." Kinstler, *Moon*, 188.

¹²⁸ Kinstler, *Moon*, 123.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 272.

¹³⁰ "For the Phrygians that are the first of all men call me the Mother of the gods of Pessinus; the Athenians, which are sprung from their own soil, Cecropian Minerva; the Cyprians, which are girt about the sea, Paphian Venus; the Cretans, which bear arrows, Dicynian Diana; the Sicilians, which speak three tongues, infernal Proserpine. . . and the Egyptians, which are excellent in all kind of ancient doctrine, and by their proper ceremonies accustomed to worship me, do call me by my true name, Queen Isis." Found in Campbell, *Occidental Mythology*, 43.

Guatama in the East (MUHF 274). Judas-Seth plays the role of Judas Iscariot and turns Yeshua over to the Romans. However, he is also the “twin” Judas-Thomas of Thomasine literature, quite literally – he is the identical twin separated from Yeshua at birth.¹³¹ And he is also the personification of Osiris’ brother, Set, responsible for the god’s murder and dismemberment.

The overarching purpose of the novel is to offer a frame of early Christianity that transcends all dualisms: spirit-body, male-female, good-evil, and sex-sacred. Yeshua’s death “abolished the boundaries between Heaven, Earth, and Hell, and made them One kingdom, eternal” (MUHF 291). Seth, the son of fragmentation and embodiment, is the twin brother of Yeshua, the personification of unity and transcendence. Mary Magdalene and mother Mary are the Goddess in her Dark and Light aspects, respectively. And Mari’s hero’s journey culminates in a *hieros gamos* with Yeshua that ends all such dualisms:

Our marriage was the wedding of body and soul; through [Yeshua] spirit descended into matter, infusing it, informing it, rendering it sacred. The marriage of eternity and time had been celebrated when we Two became one. And the child of that marriage now stretched and lengthened within my womb!¹³²

The daughter of their tryst, Anna, is the “holy grail.”¹³³ Anna is not here the font of a historical bloodline, however. Rather, Anna is a symbol of the union of polarities accomplished through Yeshua and Mari’s marriage. She is the Goddess forgotten to Christianity but, for Kinstler, rediscovered in the pages of *The Gospel of Mary* and the Nag Hammadi Codices.

The Secret Magdalene

Like *The Moon Under her Feet*, Ki Longfellow’s *The Secret Magdalene* (2005) utilizes the New Testament and the NHC in order to reconstruct a life of Mary Magdalene. Also like MUHF, *The Secret Magdalene* goes far beyond its sources to incorporate foreign legends and myths into its narrative. In the process Mary Magdalene becomes much more than a disciple of Jesus. The presentation of Mary in this book offers a more critical counter-memory of traditional Christianity, with the greater portion of miracle stories from the gospels presented as frauds,

¹³¹ Ibid, 203.

¹³² Ibid, 298. Kinstler has based her account of Mari’s smuggling out of Jerusalem to Gaul in order to give birth to Yeshua’s daughter on Lincoln et al.’s *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (see chapter one).

¹³³ Ibid 301-303.

hoaxes, or misinterpretations. Yet the portrait of Jesus and Mary is made to speak to a religiously pluralist, feminist, and psychologically informed present.

Longfellow's presentation of Mary Magdalene serves as a satiric critique of gender norms, ancient and modern. Mary and her sister Salome are fortunate to be raised by a father, Josephus, who taught them to read in several languages. While she yearns to become a great scholar, Mary is also prone to states of trance and possession. "The voice" which speaks through her proclaims "the One" who will come and bring the truth of *gnosis*.¹³⁴ To be able to leave the house, Mary and Salome must dress like boys. When their father catches them doing so he banishes them, never to return. Mary and Salome dress as males to protect themselves: Mary is known as John the Lesser, Salome as Simon Magus. Their uncle Seth smuggles them to Alexandria where they become the students of the famous Jewish philosopher Philo. Mary becomes a master philosopher and, with her sister, is initiated into the mysteries of Osiris.¹³⁵

By pretending to be men, Mary and Salome are able to enter the group led by John the Baptist and which includes Yeshu (Jesus), Simon Peter, and Andrew. Mary remains John the Lesser through most of Yeshu's ministry. When she reveals herself to be a female, Yeshua is at first upset. But soon he reckons:

Where came such thoughts of my friend, John, who is Mariamne? Where *came* these thoughts of women? Were they *my* thoughts, and had I come by them through my own fine reason or through my loving heart? I answered myself in this way: they were not mine, but came from others. Repeated by men, generation after generation, they come not with thought, but without thought; I was no more than an echo.¹³⁶

That is, the negative evaluation of women (that they were not worthy of being a disciple, of becoming a teacher, of eternal life) Yeshu had were culturally constructed gender associations. Ironically, it is Mary's pretending to be a male that allows her to be seen as a female. And her time as a male leads Mary to forswear marriage and child-bearing in favor of a life of the mind: "if I have neither husband nor child, especially no male child, I will have no one who takes precedence over what is I would do, and no one I would be required to be more precious than rubies to."¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Longfellow, *The Secret Magdalene*, 30, 124, etc. For example, "AS I AM THE ANGEL SPEAKING TRUTH – THE ONE HAS COME AMONG YOU" (124, with capitals as employed in the novel).

¹³⁵ Ibid, 96-101.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 297.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 257.

The novel's depiction of Yeshu is founded on the canonical gospels, with a twist. Longfellow is influenced by the writings of Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy (covered in chapter one) which assert Jesus of Nazareth is a fiction created for Jewish persons to have a god-man for their own mysteries.¹³⁸ For Longfellow, as for Freke and Gandy, the true miracle is that every human being is secretly their own *daemon*, or spark of divine consciousness, though this is occluded by the ego or *eidolon*. Jesus' miracles in the gospels are metaphors for ways of realizing this truth. Within the novel, Lazarus is not raised from the dead, but Yeshu teaches him about the resurrection of the spirit in life.¹³⁹ Jesus casts demon out of a woman, Sarah, but these demons are understood to be nothing more than Sarah's own reified beliefs in her own illness.¹⁴⁰ Demons do not exist, but are a trick of the mind. Yeshu gains a following as a miracle worker and healer, but few hear his message of the *daemon*.

The greatest miracle – Yeshu's apparent death and resurrection – is another hoax. Mary Magdalene, Yeshu, and his twin Judas determine that the only way for his teachings be heard is to fulfill the prophecies: "if he allows himself to be the Messiah, people would allow themselves to be "saved" and, being saved, would hear his teaching."¹⁴¹ These three read the Hebrew Bible to *deliberately* construct a narrative that will fulfill Messianic prophecies. They find an "ass, and the colt of an ass" for Yeshu to mount on his entry to Jerusalem to fulfill the prophecy of Zechariah.¹⁴² Yeshu turns the tables of the money-changers over as a reference to Psalm 74:9-10.¹⁴³

Most dramatically, the three plot Yeshu's "death and resurrection" in advance. Judas turns Yeshu in to the Romans in order fulfill his prophecy. While he is on the cross, Mary Magdalene gives Yeshu drops from a "vial of shabaz," a poison that mimics death, so the Romans will presume him dead. Unfortunately, because Jesus seemed to have died much too quickly, a centurion stabs him with a sword in the side before his body is taken to the tomb. Before the third day Mary and Judas remove the body from the tomb. Peter and Jacob (assuming

¹³⁸ See chapter 1, "Jesus the Myth." Freke and Gandy, *The Jesus Mysteries*; idem, *Jesus and the Lost Goddess*; Idem, *The Laughing Jesus*. Each of these books is listed in the "Bibliography" for Longfellow's novel.

¹³⁹ "This is how the true Dead, who are dead not in body but in spirit, are raised into the Life of the Spirit. This is the resurrection and the Life, which I am, which you are. In me is the resurrection, as it is in all men, and in all women, and he that understands this shall never die." Longfellow, *The Secret Magdalene*, 290. Compare the Valentinian doctrine of resurrection in life found in texts such as *Treatise on the Resurrection* and *The Gospel of Phillip*.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 265.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 351.

¹⁴² Longfellow, *The Secret Magdalene*, 365-366. Zechariah 9:9.

¹⁴³ "We do not see our signs, there is no longer any prophet, nor is there any among us who know how long. How long, Oh God, will your adversary revile, and your enemy spurn your name forever?" Longfellow, *The Secret Magdalene*, 371. The reference is to Matthew 12:12.

the role of the Beloved Disciple in John 20) are astonished. Mary lies and tells them she has seen an angel and describes a (fabricated) meeting with the risen Yeshu. Peter and Jacob end the novel running to tell the story of the risen Messiah, but Yeshu dies of the wounds inflicted by the centurion before he can appear to them. In sum, the story of the miracle worker, healer, and dying-rising godman is presented by Longfellow as a myth.

Suffice it to say, traditional Christianity, represented by Peter, is presented in a critical light. Peter is a member of the Sacari who brags of murdering several Romans, a Jewish person who refused circumcision, and burned entire villages to the ground who sympathized with the Romans. Longfellow recreates the tension between Peter and Mary Magdalene found in *The Gospels of Thomas* and *Mary*, with Peter finally yelling at Mary after she has informed him of Yeshu's resurrection: "Woman, I will go to Galilee. I will speak of Yehoshua who is the Messiah. But I shall erase all thoughts of you from the minds of men."¹⁴⁴ More critically still, we are told of how Yeshu discovered the Father above Yahweh in his experience of *gnosis*, and how in that moment he realized Yahweh could only be the god for those who are lost in a nightmarish existence.¹⁴⁵ Such persons expect a literal Messiah and an apocalyptic kingdom, ignoring the kingdom is within – people like Peter, and those who follow his form of Christianity.

While the traditional church and its memory are thoroughly discredited by Longfellow, she also re-envisioned Jesus and Mary in ways that serve for meaningful attachments in the present. The message of Yeshu in this novel embraces democratic humanism and religious pluralism. Here, too, Longfellow is influenced by the works of Freke and Gandy. Longfellow has Yeshu deliver numerous sayings from NHC sources like *The Gospel of Thomas* that can be read as evidence all persons are divine, such as "he who will drink from my mouth will become like me. I myself shall become he, and the things that are hidden shall be revealed to him."¹⁴⁶ Yeshu speaks out against religious exclusivism and turns to Greeks, Samaritans, and Gentiles as well as Jews.¹⁴⁷ As regards religious pluralism, we learn that Mary and Salome not only fall under the tutelage of Philo in Alexandria, but also study with a traveling Buddhist who teaches them of the

¹⁴⁴ Longfellow, *The Secret Magdalene*, 425.

¹⁴⁵ "[Yeshu speaking] It was this man to whom dreams came, dreams of such confusion I would shout myself awake, strike out at shadows, soak my bed with sweat. . . is there any wonder that the man I was, craven with fear and inflated with pride, would make a god like Yahweh? This is the way of men, afraid before life, tormented by pain they cannot escape, and desires they cannot appease. Would the god of these not also be a god of rage and fear and jealousy and desires he cannot appease?" Longfellow, *The Secret Magdalene*, 179. I suggest this is an implicit reference to the nightmare-existence described in *The Gospel of Truth*.

¹⁴⁶ Longfellow, *The Secret Magdalene*, 324. Compare *The Gospel of Thomas* logion 108.

¹⁴⁷ "[Yeshu speaking] For the Father so loves the world that he would not condemn nor would he judge, such as these are the doings of ignorant fearful men. But rather would he call all to his Kingdom." Longfellow, *The Secret Magdalene*, 295.

Guatama and reads the Vedas with them.¹⁴⁸ Mary is an initiate into the mystery cult of Isis. And the whole tale of Yeshu's dying and rising is written to recapitulate the story of the godman Osiris-Dionysus charted by Freke and Gandy.

Ultimately, Longfellow's novel provides a meta-commentary on the relationship between memory and meaning. Several characters in the course of the novel ask Mary or Yeshu, "what is truth?" On his death-bed, Yeshu determines that the ultimate truth is that "each man holds a Truth, holy unto himself. . . .if I should die, a man who would look for me must look within and, by so looking, would find not me, but himself."¹⁴⁹ God is consciousness and is within all persons. Philo of Alexandria, however, said it better:

Which of these godmen are true? What is truth? It does not matter whether a story is true or if it is not true. What matters is the eternal truth in the story. The goddess Truth does not come into the world naked; she has too bright a shine, so clothes herself in symbols, as all gods and goddesses and symbols. . . .yet behind each shines a truth. The godman does not 'teaching something' or 'think something' but rather inspires intense feeling unto rapture. The godman opens the self to God.¹⁵⁰

Such a statement can be read as a commentary on the very project of writing and reading historical novels. Symbols like Jesus and Mary Magdalene are recast in dramatic ways. They are written out of the prisons of traditional memory they have languished in for millennia. Now free, they can serve as symbols for affective attachment ("intense feeling unto rapture") for readers who have lost their sense of belonging in the Christian tradition.

Channeling Mary Magdalene

Over the last decade, several women have claimed to "channel" Mary Magdalene and pen works in her name.¹⁵¹ As Catherine Gutierrez and others have recognized, Channeling is the direct descendent of 19th century Spiritualism.¹⁵² In both instances, the medium-channels are typically (though not exclusively) females. The medium-channels relay messages from an extra-

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 86-87.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 421.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 101.

¹⁵¹ The works covered in this section rely on channels who have penned their sessions with Mary Magdalen.

However, the phenomenon is not restricted to these two author-channels. Amendola, *Mary Magdalene: Revelations from a First Century Avatar* (Vols 1-3); Kinkel, *Mary Magdalene Beckons*; Idem. *Sublime Union*.

¹⁵² Gutierrez, "Introduction to *The Handbook of Spiritualism and Channeling*,"; Albanese, "Historical Imagination and Channeled Theology."

mortal being through his or her body and/or voice. There are also substantial differences between channeling and Spiritualism. Whereas Spiritualist mediums contacted spirits of the human departed, channels become a conduit for alien intelligences, immortals, even gods.¹⁵³ The technological discourse changed from the Morse wire (taps on a table) to television (changing the channel).¹⁵⁴ Last, the Spiritualist fascination with materializations (e.g., apports, instruments playing of their own accord) is practically absent in channeling literature.

Channeling of Mary Magdalene only began *after* the shifts in cultural memory surrounding Mary Magdalen charted in this chapter had begun to crystallize. Popular and academic histories conveyed Mary as the first apostle. Fiction had developed an image of Mary as a visionary and the bride of Jesus. Popular reception had re-envisioned her as the Divine Feminine counterpart to Jesus' Divine Masculine. Gloria Amendola and Mercedes Kinkel, the channels whose work I analyze in this section, have clearly absorbed this multifaceted new memory of Mary.

The theoretical scholarship on Spiritualism and Channeling provides a lens through which to understand how, why, and the meaning behind Mary Magdalene is being channeled. Specifically, the transgressions of authority, gender models, sexuality, and dichotomies practiced by mediums-channels apply to these case studies. In terms of authority, spirits and channeled entities are conveyed as having higher than human wisdom, being closer to god (or *a* god themselves), and knowing the true reality of both physical and transcendent realities.¹⁵⁵ In these channeled works, Mary Magdalen is conceived as the Divine Feminine or an Avatar of the Divine Feminine. She speaks of the deeper realities of the human body, the earth, and life after death. She is co-equal to Jesus of Nazareth and uses this status to offer critiques against traditional Christianity.

Both Spiritualism and Channeling lend themselves to provocative sexuality and gender analyses.¹⁵⁶ The liminal nature of the séance and “altered state” of the medium foster imaginative new approaches to gender and sex that ripple out from the séance into the society at large. In Spiritualism, the female medium was granted a position of authority, power, and economic

¹⁵³ See especially Partridge, “Channeling Extraterrestrials”

¹⁵⁴ Urban, “The Medium is the Message in the Spacious Present,” 320-322.

¹⁵⁵ Trompfe, *Altered States*, 4.

¹⁵⁶ Braude, *Radical Spirits*; Owen, *The Darkened Room*; Trompf, *Altered States*; Idem, “Queering the Séance”; Gutierrez, “Marriage” in *Plato's Ghost*; Shusko, “Spiritualism and the Oneida Community”; Bradby, “Channeling – The Cinderella of the New Age?”; Lowry, “Mrs. Underhill's *Missing Link*: Corporeality, Social Performance, and Rhetorical Invention in the Nineteenth-Century Public Sphere.”

agency that she lacked outside the drawing room.¹⁵⁷ The transgressive depictions of love and sex helped support the early “free love” movement and legal push to ease requirements for divorce. The most famous channels have been females. Because these entities have been reincarnated over aeons they have, at one time or another, been every sex, gender, creature, and species imaginable. From this perspective, gender is a temporary, playful performance.

The channels in this chapter make similarly provocative statements regarding gender and sexuality when read as voiced from within the Christian tradition. Mary Magdalene legitimizes practices of sexual magic by speaking of her own magical sex with Jesus of Nazareth. Although Mary is understood to be the spouse of Jesus in both works, her program of “sacred sexuality” can be practiced outside of marriage.¹⁵⁸ Moreover, in both works Mary takes a leadership role in the world and in the bedroom. That is, Mary is a leader, preacher, healer, and visionary to the disciples on par with Jesus. And it is Mary who initiates Jesus into the mysteries of sacred sex.

Spiritualism and channeling also destabilize dichotomies. The sacred and profane, body and spirit, self and other, history and present, death and life – all are deconstructed in the séance. Mary Magdalen’s message imbues the earth with transcendent forces, conveys the body as a battery of spiritual energies, and encourages her listeners to seek the sacred beyond organized religion. Channeling Mary Magdalene performs the dialectic of the past with the present charted in this dissertation. A voice from the buried past speaks to the living present. She corrects the inherited memory of the Christian past while offering an embodied, re-enchanted, feminist, and sexualized form of Christian practice better suited to America in the 21st century.

Gloria Amendola

Biography

Before she began channeling Mary Magdalene in the year 2000, Gloria Amendola (B: 1975) had been vexed by her ambivalence to the Christian tradition. Raised Catholic, Amendola looked to a range of other Christian groups in order to better understand the figure of Jesus. Attending Easter Service in the year 2000, she heard the minister preach he would not even mention the name “Mary” today – this was a day about Jesus. She was aghast.¹⁵⁹ Amendola went

¹⁵⁷ Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 41-76; Gutierrez, *Plato’s Ghost*, 97-103.

¹⁵⁸ The term “sacred sexuality” is Kierkegaard’s.

¹⁵⁹ “It was his declaration of denial of the feminine that was my tipping point. How dare he say he wouldn’t even acknowledge Mother Mary! Underneath his bold pronouncement, underneath that denial of her presence and her power, I knew he was denying the feminine.” Amendola, *Mary Magdalene: Revelations from a First Century Avatar*, Book 1, Kindle Locations 81-83.

straight home and began to write a play about women from the Bible.¹⁶⁰ Her goal was to restore the forgotten feminine to Christianity.

Researching for her play led Amendola to Mary Magdalene. As she recalls it, when she opened a book on Mary Magdalene “it was as if a life force jumped out of the book and formed a hologram that appeared before me. The image was that of Mary Magdalene and she was jumping up and down and yelling out – “pick me, pick me!””¹⁶¹ She eventually decided to write the play exclusively about Mary Magdalene. It was performed in 2001-2002. At the same time, Amendola began to focus her devotion on the figure of Mary Magdalene. In 2012 she began to sense Magdalene attempting to breakthrough during her channeling sessions. Then, in early 2013, she received word that Magdalene wanted to use her as an instrument to convey the Mysteries she and Yeshua taught but that had been lost to history.¹⁶²

Counter-Memory

We are told by Amendola-Mary that Mary Magdalene was sent to Egypt (Khem) to study the High Mysteries while she was still a young child. She progressed through a series of initiations until she became an unrivaled practitioner of High Magic. Yet while there she found, deep beneath the Temple, rituals being conducted by lizard gods and dark priests where young women would be raped and sacrificed.¹⁶³ These beings are the Dark Ones, the archons, who have ruled the world for millennia until the recent dawn of a new age.¹⁶⁴ These Dark Ones manifested first through the Romans and Jewish priests, and later down through the ages in those who wished to put out the divine light.¹⁶⁵ Magdalene was protected from this fate by the Ancient Ones, beings who had once been mortal but through magical training had become immortals of pure light.¹⁶⁶ Yeshua’s and Mary’s teachings are meant to evolve the light body within all humans and overpower the Dark Ones.

After she finished her training as high priestess in the Rites of Isis, Magdalene returned home to Bethany. There she met Yeshua, who had been receiving similar magical training (we

¹⁶⁰ More recently, Amendola has written a pair of novels, *The Tower and the Dream* and *The Tower and the Land*. She is not the first channel to begin as a creative writer. The most influential channel of the twentieth century, Jane Roberts, had a similar background. This correlation deserves further scrutiny.

¹⁶¹ Amendola, *Mary Magdalene* book loc 1, 87.

¹⁶² Amendola, *Mary Magdalene* book 1, loc 285-290.

¹⁶³ Ibid, loc 376-400.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid loc 630. Elsewhere Amendola reveals that these underground Dark Ones are the Nephilim/Watchers who mated with human women in Gen 6:4. They are former light beings who became enslaved within matter and, as a condition of their release, were cast into the bowels of the earth. See Amendola, *Mary Magdalene* book 2, 34.

¹⁶⁵ Amendola, *Mary Magdalene* book 2, 14-15.

¹⁶⁶ Idem, *Mary Magdalene* book 1, loc 618.

are told) in southern France, Britain, and India.¹⁶⁷ While they had known one another as children, this reunion proved the beginning of a life-long romance. They practiced magic with one another to “grow the light body.”¹⁶⁸

Amendola’s account provides a new reading of events from the canonical gospels. For instance, according to Mark Jesus wandered into the desert after his baptism (Mark 1:12-13). According to Amendola, Yeshua at this time was receiving a light transmission from Sirius that contained the codes of creation.¹⁶⁹ This was the light of Sophia uniting with Yeshua’s pineal gland so that he could preach a message of spiritual evolution.¹⁷⁰ Mary traveled in her light body to be with Yeshua during this process, absorbing the demons that sought to invade his soul. These are the demons of Luke 8:2 and Mark 16:9.

Or take the crucifixion. According to Amendola, Mary Magdalene and Yeshua recognized the insurrections of the Zealots would likely end in his assassination. So they prepared. Yeshua and Mary activated his divine spark to preserve his body. When he was taken down from the cross, Mary and others deceived the Romans into thinking they wanted to prepare his corpse. Instead, they called forth angelic assistance, soothed his wounds with aloe, and prayed.¹⁷¹ He survived, and Mary and Yeshua fled. Their disciples to spread false rumors of his resurrection (apparently the canonical gospels) so they could escape unimpeded. Joseph of Arimathea’s connections helped protect them as they made their way to *Rennes les Bains*, Gaul, or present-day France.

Mary Magdalene, Yeshua, and their children (one son and daughter) settled in France, with brief journeys to Britain to study with the Druids. We are told that Mary was a healer and magician of comparable power to Yeshua himself. Together they would manifest bread from dust, summon the rains so villages could grow crops, and healed the blind and sick.¹⁷² Sometimes they would work together: “I would summon the life-force and allow that energy to build all around me. Then Yeshua would step into that field of energy and direct it to the many people who came to us for healing.”¹⁷³ Eventually they were visited by the Creator (or Blue)

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, loc 435.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid loc 593. By “light body” Amendola appears to mean something akin to the subtle body as spoken of in Theosophical discourse. It is a body of light that enclothes the divine spark in all persons. It appears to be the container of past-life memories and the site of psi capabilities.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, loc 484.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, loc 575.

¹⁷¹ Amendola, *Mary Magdalen* book 2, 12-13.

¹⁷² Ibid, 45.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 52.

Beings from Sirius who rewrote their DNA.¹⁷⁴ These beings called on all four of them to separate and preach the light for the remainder of their lives. Heartbroken, Mary Magdalene resigns herself to this fate and visits Spain, Portugal, Egypt, and the Americas.¹⁷⁵ At the end of his life, Yeshua would not die but rather ascend into the Light. His ascension “created an enormous oversoul in the heavens.” Since then, humans have been able to tap into this oversoul and help manifest light on earth.

Meaning of Memory

Amendola’s fascinating counter-memory speaks directly the present. The implications can be divided as follows: a) critique of the evils of institutional religion and politics; b) the re-enchantment of the earth; c) warnings humans are on the wrong path; and d) an erotic attachment to Yeshua. The first three are standard concerns of the New Age movement of which channeling is an expression.¹⁷⁶ In each case these ideas are granted an authority that they would otherwise lack by being attributed to Mary Magdalene. More importantly, Mary Magdalene legitimizes them as concerns within the Christian tradition broadly construed, offering a form of identification to those with progressive ideals and a residual attachment to Christian symbols.

According to Mary, Yeshua never sought to found a religion. Nothing could have been further from his intention:

His teachings were altered to create a religion. Yeshua was not looking for religion, but revelation—revelation through initiation and a deeper understanding of the Mysteries, of the nature of our reality. He came to help people break free of their limitations because of the constructs of mental programming. He never ever wanted his people to be restricted by a religion of false beliefs!¹⁷⁷

The Roman Catholic Church is enslaved to the Dark Ones.¹⁷⁸ These Dark Ones learned of Jesus’ survival and sent emissaries throughout the Roman Empire to assassinate him. Failing that, they

¹⁷⁴ Amendola, *Mary Magdalene* book 3, 17-18.

¹⁷⁵ Amendola, *Mary Magdalene* book 3, 21. On her visit to the Americas (where she, Yeshua, and their children briefly reunited), “the tribal people of America helped us immensely. They were instrumental in protecting the places of light upon the land and keeping the sacred fires burning. Many tribes had contact with Yeshua. They were also visited upon by the Blue Beings, and later, by our valiant knights who encountered more opposing forces than you could ever imagine. But they were strong and powerful men, and the blood of our kin ran through their veins.” (25)

¹⁷⁶ Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*. Heelas, *The New Age Movement*.

¹⁷⁷ Amendola, *Mary Magdalene* book 3, 51.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 23.

have run a disinformation campaign about Yeshua and Mary Magdalene to prevent people from realizing that the “light” is within.¹⁷⁹ They repressed the divine feminine. Moreover, the church demonized magic so that they could practice it in secret, harness the energies of the earth and use them to augment their own power.¹⁸⁰ Mary’s message is in no small part intended to topple the Roman Catholic Church and allow others to reconnect to Yeshua and Mary through a new memory.

The earth Mary Magdalene speaks of is thoroughly enchanted. Blue Beings communicate through our dreams and reprogram human DNA. The Ancient Ones shift easily from spirit to body and back. Yeshua and Mary levitate, project their light bodies far distances, materialize trees from nothing, and ascend rather than experience bodily death. Yeshua draws down energies from the stars and Mary hides them in the earth to be reactivated at a later time. And at this very moment, the Ancient Ones and the Dark Ones are locked in a battle for the future nature of earth. Humans play the primary role in this battle.

We further learn that the extraordinary potentials realized by Yeshua and Mary all reside within each human being *in potentia*.¹⁸¹ We can all be transformed into galactic human beings. One first purges the “mental and emotional programming” that prevents the light body from infusing our material body.¹⁸² Once accomplished, the light body is activated and infuses our blood. Blood becomes a carrier of “ancestral memories” – a sort of *anamnesis* of all human memories – and a conduit for the energies of the earth.¹⁸³ Next, the union of light-energy and the pineal gland (precisely as happened with Yeshua in the desert, above) can then bring both hemispheres of the brain online at the same time.¹⁸⁴ With both hemispheres in unison, the individual opens a portal to the non-local mind and learns all wisdom is available through it.¹⁸⁵ In short, full human potential is to become open to energies of the earth and stars by activating the light-body.

Fulfilling human potential on a large scale is becoming a dire necessity according to Mary. Nefarious forces have controlled the political, economic, and technological powers for so long that the earth itself is threatened. In each of the books Magdalene highlights climate change

¹⁷⁹ Amendola, *Mary Magdalene* book 2, 57.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 41.

¹⁸¹ Amendola, *Mary Magdalene* book 2, 27-28 and 57-58. Amendola here explicitly uses the discourse of the Human Potential Movement, on which see Kripal, *Esalen*, 135-269.

¹⁸² Idem, book 3, 48.

¹⁸³ Idem, book 1, loc 655.

¹⁸⁴ Idem, book 2, 48.

¹⁸⁵ Idem, book 3, 41. Amendola here explicitly refers to consciousness as something accessed through, not produced by, the brain.

and devastation of the earth as *the* critical issue.¹⁸⁶ This is not simply due to the (very real) impacts of climate change on the water supply, inhabitable land, and resources. It is also because the earth is alive with energetic currents and powers that are being impacted by ecological disaster. Massive economic inequality is a further symptom of the Dark Ones in power.¹⁸⁷ Mary suggests the only way to fix these tremendous problems is to activate the light and, by extension, help return the Divine Feminine to earth. In so doing feminine qualities such as compassion and love will return to positions of power.¹⁸⁸

The first-person narrative of Mary Magdalene's love-life with Yeshua provides an imaginative venue for women to achieve a mystical and sexual relationship to Jesus *as equals*. Some of the depictions of Yeshua and Mary's romance would not be out of place in Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series. See this, from when they reconvened after their own magical initiations: "he noticed me as a woman. It made me blush. He was such a sensual man. It was embedded in the way he moved, the way he spoke, the way he thought. . . One moment he was so playful and kind, then the next he would look at me with his commanding way and my heart would skip a beat!"¹⁸⁹ Or this, discussing their sexual encounters: "to be with Yeshua was the most sensual pleasure I had ever experienced. He was more air and I was more earth and water. But together we were fire!"¹⁹⁰

When they are forced to part ways in order to bring the light to separate corners of the globe, Mary sobs and pines much as any lover resigned to an extended break from their partner might.¹⁹¹ But at the end of their separate earthly journeys Yeshua and Mary Magdalene ascend together: "We had been shown a way to merge our souls together, to blend our light bodies to become one. It was a deeply complex process but Yeshua assured me we could do it. He dedicated himself to mastering that process so we could come together in this way for all eternity."¹⁹² Yeshua and Mary are "twin flames" – exemplars of the most perfect love between two beings possible on earth and beyond.

To be sure, there is a hint of the incredible (and more than a hint of the blasphemous) if this relationship is understood within Christian tradition. If understood as a recent form of hetero-erotic Christian mysticism, however, it takes on a different light. Heterosexual women

¹⁸⁶ Amendola, book 1, loc 618; Idem, book 2, 20-21; Idem., book 3, 11.

¹⁸⁷ Amendola, book 2, 20.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, 32.

¹⁸⁹ Amendola, book 1, loc 533-536.

¹⁹⁰ Idem, book 3, 24.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 13.

¹⁹² Ibid, 17-18.

enacting erotic forms of mysticism throughout the middle ages sought the marriage of the soul to the bridegroom, Jesus.¹⁹³ The erotic ecstasy of this process is depicted in the famous statue of “Theresa in Ecstasy.”¹⁹⁴ Amendola’s channeled re-enactment of a sexual, magical relationship to Yeshua serves a similar function. Mary Magdalene provides the symbolic conduit through which contemporary women can achieve hetero-erotic relationships to Jesus.

Mercedes Kinkel (B: 1960)

Mercedes Kinkel (B: 1960) is a channeler, life coach, and sex-therapist who currently resides in the Bay Area.¹⁹⁵ Her path to becoming a channel for Mary Magdalene is circuitous. She was raised in a secular Jewish household in a small, predominantly Christian town in the Midwest. Kinkel’s religious experiences of Jesus began at the age of eight. While visiting the 1968 World’s Fair in San Antonio, Kinkel and her mother saw Michaelangelo’s *Pieta*, a statue that depicts mother Mary holding the Jesus’ lifeless body. She “had a profound experience of moving into a transcendent state.”¹⁹⁶ At the age of twelve Kinkel began to have visions of Jesus (whom she calls Yeshua) wandering the arid landscape of Palestine with nearly one-hundred followers. She believes these are deep memories of her past life as a follower of his and a friend of Mary Magdalene.¹⁹⁷

Kinkel’s fascination with the Christian tradition was shelved until she reached middle age. Her spiritual interests drew her first to eastern teaching, first with the study of Zen Buddhism and hatha yoga, and soon thereafter to become a disciple of Adi Da (1939-2008). She remained a part of Adidam, Adi Da’s new religious movement, for seventeen years.¹⁹⁸ She joined the sectarian movement Waking Down (which had broken away from Adidam) before relocating herself to Hawaii in the year 1999. There she studied and taught Tantric sexuality until relocating to Sante Fe, New Mexico in 2009.¹⁹⁹ In 2010 she began receiving channeled messages

¹⁹³ To be sure, this same procedure was also sought by male monks, and in such cases the bridal-mysticism becomes homoerotic. Here I am concerned with hetero-erotic female practices.

¹⁹⁴ By Gian Lorenzi Bernini.

¹⁹⁵ <http://mercedeskinkel.com/>

¹⁹⁶ Kinkel, *Mary Magdalene Beckons*, loc 162.

¹⁹⁷ Kinkel, *Sublime Union*, 6.

¹⁹⁸ Idem, *Mary Magdalene Beckons*, loc 179. Adi Da Samraj (birthname: Franklin Jones) claimed in life to be an avatar or “the coming god man.” While quite eclectic in practice, Adidam would increasingly become a center of bhakti yoga practice, with Adi Da as the subject of ritual devotion. Adi Da and his disciples would become infamous for the sexual practices, which included public fornication, partner swapping, free love, sexual shaming, and taping pornographic films. See Feuerstein, “Chapter 4: The Many Faces of Adi-Da,” in *Holy Wisdom*.

¹⁹⁹ Tantra is the term Kinkel uses. She defines Tantra as “a body of ancient Indian spiritual practices that included sexuality as an avenue of oneness with the Divine.” See Kinkel, *Sublime Union*, 291.

from Mary Magdalene. The first series of messages has been assembled into the book *Mary Magdalene Beckons: Join the River of Love*. The second, *Sublime Union: A Woman's Sexual Odyssey Guided by Mary Magdalene*, depicts a second series of channelings Kerkel received over five months in 2012. It contains a program of practices in what Kerkel calls "sacred sexuality" that culminates in the wedding of the divine feminine and masculine within heterosexual coitus.

Kerkel's depictions of Mary Magdalene draw on the erotic, visionary, and divine feminine memories. Of these, Kerkel makes the erotic dimension much more explicit. Mary teaches Kerkel the sex magic she used to practice with Yeshua. Magdalene as she speaks through Kerkel is the divine feminine counterpart to Yeshua's divine masculine. She desires to make the body, emotions, and sexuality holy again after millennia of disparagement.²⁰⁰

Counter-memory

Relatively little information is given about Mary Magdalene's earlier life on earth. As a child, Mary was trained as a priestess of Isis.²⁰¹ Yeshua spent his lost years in India.²⁰² Mary tells us that she and Yeshua were lovers have remained bonded ever since:

[W]e were in Sacred Relationship with each other, and this included sacred sexual relationship. We were both prepared for this through the training we received individually through sacred traditions, especially the Egyptian and Indian sacred paths. We engaged in lovemaking as a process of transforming our bodies into light and love, in service to our destinies. And we were deeply in love with each other. We lived this love through all aspects of our lives, and both of us were dedicated to the work that Yeshua was the leader for.²⁰³

Sacred Relationship refers to the meeting of two individuals *who have already brought together* the divine feminine and masculine within. That is, these "gendered" ideas of the divine do not map onto males and females respectively. Rather, every person has feminine and masculine qualities of the divine. Once both of these qualities have been realized by an individual, he or she

²⁰⁰ Kerkel, *Mary Magdalene Beckons*, loc 322: "Your body is beautiful. Your sexuality is sacred. Your emotions are pathways to God. Your presence is a blessed gift. Your open heart is the most powerful vessel of transformation, of receiving divine light and empowering it with love."

²⁰¹ Kerkel, *Sublime Union*, 9. Kerkel believes she, Mary Magdalene, and Mother Mary had all been priestesses of Isis together in a previous life.

²⁰² Ibid, xviii.

²⁰³ Kerkel, *Mary Magdalene Beckons*, loc 1059-1062.

might seek a relationship to another individual of similar spiritual accomplishment. The result is a sacred relationship.

Aside from Yeshua and Mary's sacred relationship, Kinkel's Mary Magdalene delivers a memory of early Christianity that is aligned with tradition. Yeshua dies on the cross. There is no mention of a child or bloodline coming from Mary and Yeshua's sexual relationship. We are told Mary is a priestess of Isis but we never hear stories of her own practice of magic. The absence of a focus on counter-memory does not imply this work is less sensational or antagonistic than others. Rather, it seems to reflect the availability of new interpretations of Mary Magdalene in the culture at large. Kinkel's exposure to scholarship on Mary Magdalene is slim to non-existent. Yet the counter-memories of Mary that have been charted in this chapter (especially the visionary, erotic, and divine feminine) are available for Kinkel to "channel." Counter-memories produced by scholars and rigorous laypersons have entered the shared imaginary of the cultic milieu.

Meaning of Memory

The messages from Kinkel's Mary Magdalene lack the fantastically enchanted world, Dark Ones, and prophecy of global catastrophe found in Amendola's Magdalene (above). Kinkel's Mary exhibits more down-to-earth concerns. She focuses on three key themes: a) the return of the divine feminine to the west; b) revisioning our understanding of the human body and emotions; and c) sex magic as a primary means of achieving unity with the divine.

Kinkel's Mary Magdalene informs us that we are entering a new age. These ages are typified according to the "rays" of God-light sent to the earth. The first ray is Divine Will and is associated with the masculine characteristics of transcendence, power, insight, assertiveness, and attention.²⁰⁴ The religions that have developed during this era are masculine in nature according to Kinkel. Buddhism is the archetypal masculine religion, while Catholicism's male hierarchy indicates how this energy can be misinterpreted and misapplied. In her commentary on these teachings, Kinkel reflects how in her research "I became sensitized to the many ways that religions have suppressed and even demonized both women and the Feminine principle, including portraying the human body, sexuality, and emotions as sinful or nonspiritual."²⁰⁵

Mary Magdalene's re-appearance is indicative of the new age dawning under the influence of the second divine ray: the feminine ray of Love. This ray is characterized by

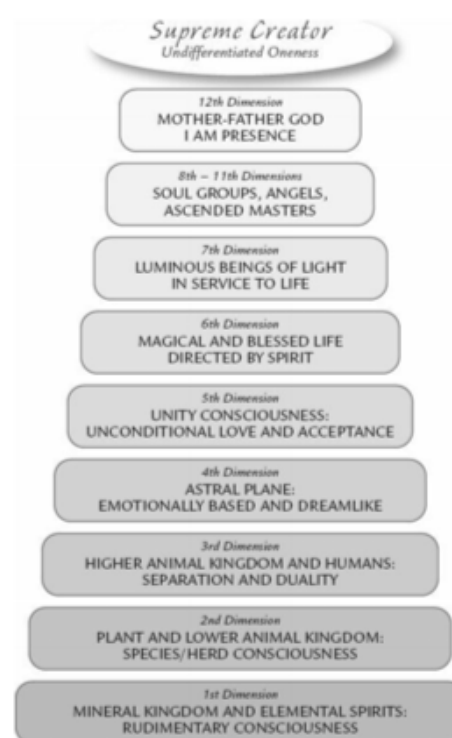
²⁰⁴ Kinkel, *Mary Magdalene Beckons*, loc 957-972.

²⁰⁵ Ibid, loc 1138-1140.

creativity, wisdom, sensuality, embodiment, receptivity, and most importantly, sexuality.²⁰⁶ In this new age, females will ascend to positions of power within traditional religions, new religious perspectives will be born, and the sacred qualities of the body and sexuality will once again be celebrated.²⁰⁷ The states of consciousness and being once restricted to prophets and mystics are becoming available to all (see figure). According to Mary Magdalene, this return of the divine feminine will naturally lead to an inclusive form of relating to others. No more will the world be a place for “me versus them.” It will be a land where “me and you” can share and evolve together.²⁰⁸ Regardless of the naivete of such a statement, it is evident that this new age is intended to speak to those who embrace political feminism, religious and ethnic pluralism, and the body as a site of the sacred.

The sacred body that Mary Magdalene speaks of is not entirely physical. Like Amendola’s Mary Magdalene, Kerkel’s Mary has adopted an anthropology that is indebted to Theosophy.²⁰⁹ In this anthropology, each person is composed of a physical body, an etheric (or energy) body, an emotional body, a mental body, a causal body and a spiritual body. The first four comprise those bodies that have the most immediate connection to the three-dimensional world. The causal body is the identifiable “I” or “soul” that persists from lifetime to lifetime.²¹⁰ This soul acts *through* the

Figure 8-1. MAP OF CONSCIOUSNESS



²⁰⁶ Ibid loc 972 above.

²⁰⁷ Ibid loc 1130-1132.

²⁰⁸ Ibid loc 1232-34.

²⁰⁹ The model of the body described by Kerkel is practically identical with that described by Sri Aurobindo in his essay “Rebirth and Other Worlds.”

²¹⁰ “Often described as the body of cause and effect, it is the repository from which we create our reality through our thoughts, feelings, and actions. This body contains the knowledge of all past and present incarnations and is the source of our still small voice, or conscience, which guides us to follow our values and life purpose.” Kerkel, *Mary Magdalene Beckons*, Locations 1096-1098.

mental, emotional, and energy bodies. It also contains all the memories of past incarnations. The causal body is connected to the spiritual body, an individualized aspect of the divine that is identical to God.²¹¹

Sacred sexuality is a series of techniques that purify and activate each of the four lower bodies so that they each become vessels for divine influx.²¹² Doing so, one realizes the divine masculine and feminine within oneself and subsequently gains access to the higher dimensions of being (see figure to right).²¹³ The program includes beginning, intermediate, and advanced teachings. In the first phase, both of the individuals open their seven chakras through breathwork, intention, and visualization.²¹⁴ They each practice moving this energy up and down the *sushuma*, or central channel along the spine that links the seven chakras. The goal here is to activate and engage the energy and emotion bodies.

In the second phase, partners begin to harmonize their energy bodies and begin to manipulate the flow of energy while in coitus. For instance, in the “spoon exercise,” the man cuddles the woman from behind as they visualize each of their chakras resonating with the corresponding chakra of the other person (crown to crown, sacral to sacral, etc.).²¹⁵ Then, in coitus, both individuals visualize the circulation of energy through their energy bodies: “I saw our bodies as having two poles—one at the crown of the head and one at the base of the spine. I perceived the crown as the Masculine pole and the root chakra as the Feminine pole. As we moved the sexual energy up and down the spine, I felt us sharing each of those energies with its opposite.”²¹⁶ The male in these exercises (“Tony” within *Sublime Union*) does not ejaculate. However, we are told both partners experience multiple orgasms in each form of practice.²¹⁷

²¹¹ “Our spiritual body is the source of our connection to the Divine. This body includes our I AM presence, or our individual connection to and manifestation of Source, as well as our indwelling divine consciousness.” Kinkel, *Mary Magdalene Beckons*, locations 1098-1100.

²¹² “Sexuality is a divine gift. It is an opportunity for you to experience the merging of your physical self, your energetic self, your heart, and your consciousness with another person and with the Divine. It is a great beauty, a sacrament of love.” Kinkel, *Mary Magdalene Beckons*, Locations 919-921.

²¹³ Ibid, loc 1433. The “Figure 8.1” indicates this is the first figure in the eighth chapter of her book.

²¹⁴ See for instance “Opening the Heart, Sacral, and Root Chakras (Figure 3.2) in *Sublime Union*, 33-34.

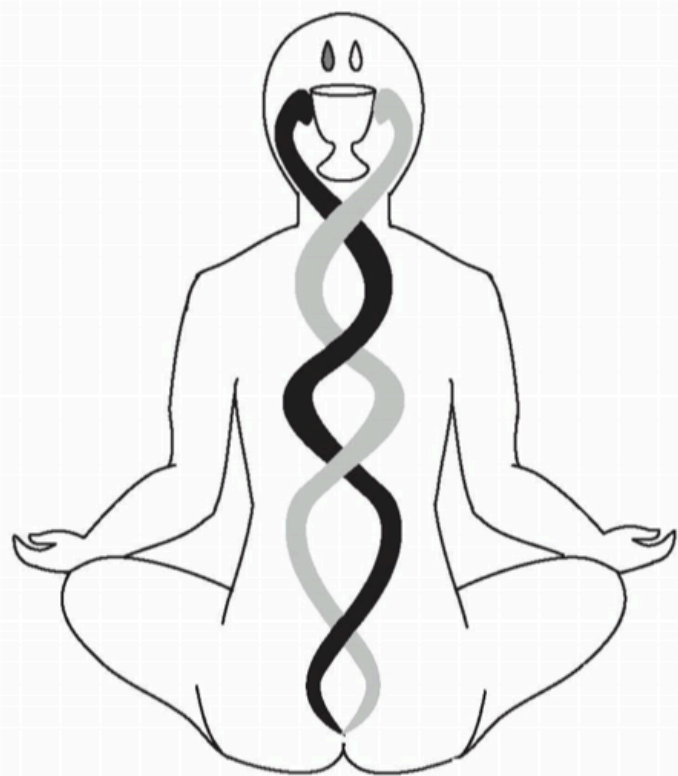
²¹⁵ Kinkel, *Sublime Union*, 62.

²¹⁶ Ibid, 139.

²¹⁷ “We then began our deep breathing and undulating again, moving the energy up and down our spines. But this time it was intensely magnified, especially as we moved the energy to the root chakra. We would move the energy up and down a few times and then experience another full-body orgasm, continuing this again and again. Suddenly a new pathway of energy opened up, causing us to feel as though we had a shared column of energy between us. During each orgasmic release, the energy rushed up this shared central channel like fireworks shooting upward into the night. Then Tony would smile and say, “Again,” and we would start the pattern once more. We did this for quite a few cycles until we once again came to rest.” Kinkel, *Sublime Union*, 139.

The program culminates in the “Four Serpents Practice.” In this technique (see figure), the partners visualize a pair of kundalini serpents rising from the base chakra and winding up through the central channel until reaching the crown. They each project their own kundalini serpents into the body of their partner. The serpents face one another at the crown chakra. Each individual visualizes a chalice forming between the two serpents, now located in their partner. Intoning ‘Ra’, the partners visualize a shaft of light beaming from the divine into crown chakra. When successful, two drops of “nectarous energy” will drop into the chalice: one red, the feminine essence, and one white, signifying the masculine essence. And then:

Allow the drops to mix in the chalice. Be aware of a sweet taste at the back of your throat or of light in your head, and a feeling of ecstasy. As soon as the ecstasy rises, focus your awareness on your energy body, which will then spread the ecstasy through your whole physical and energetic self for strengthening, energizing, rejuvenation, and transformation.²¹⁸



Several things about this series of channeled sex teachings are worth noting. Mary Magdalene is passing on the sex-teachings that, we understand, she herself practiced with Yeshua. Yeshua is a practitioner of sex magic. Moreover, Mary never mentions she and Yeshua were married and does not ask that the partners who engage in sacred sexuality be married either. She instead maintains that the partners need to feel “safe.”²¹⁹ Kinkel conducts the sex program with a man she has feelings for but does not live with. They go their separate ways after finishing the program. In short, Mary Magdalene not only legitimizes sexual magic, but sexual activity beyond the confines of marriage. It is Mary who

²¹⁸ Kinkel, *Sublime Union*, 270-1.

²¹⁹ *Ibid*, 80-81.

passes these teachings along and, in Mercedes Kinkel, a woman who takes a leadership role within the bedroom. At no point does “Tony” initiate the next step.

Second, these practices embrace a wide-ranging religious pluralism. Both Mary and Kinkel (within her commentaries on Mary’s teachings) identify the practices as forms of Hindu Tantra, although mention is also made of Taoist, Buddhist and Egyptian techniques.²²⁰ Mary Magdalene is not only legitimizing the practice of sex magic – she is incorporating practices from a wide range of non-Christian religions.

It would be all too easy to be cynical here and note that Mary Magdalene legitimizes the sex techniques that Kinkel herself teaches workshops in.²²¹ While a cynical interpretation may be warranted, it does not explain the third major point. Mary Magdalene operates as more than a channel of ancient wisdom here. She offers a new mode of relating to a deity deeply influenced by humanistic psychology and the notion of “unconditional positive regard.”²²² Mary encourages Kinkel and lavishes her with love: “I feel so much love for you. I want to affirm this, so that you know it fully. This love is personal to you, and you can receive it personally. It is also universal, the love of our Father-Mother-God.”²²³ Mary lauds Kinkel with praise for her “unusual sensitivity” and “abilities.”²²⁴ Mary notices the pain Kinkel is experiencing in her relationship with Tony and becomes a container for her sadness.²²⁵ Mary Magdalene plays the role of humanistic therapist for Kinkel. In Mary, Kinkel finds a safe, positive, caring symbol to whom she can attach. As such, Mary here offers a new, therapeutic paradigm for symbolic attachment within the Christian tradition broadly construed.

²²⁰ For Egyptian practices see Kinkel, *Sublime Union*, 157 and 196; for Buddhist yabyum, see Ibid 121; For Taoism, see Ibid 32 and 41; Hindu Tantra is referenced throughout. For the most explicit mention see Ibid 119.

²²¹ There are people today, including this woman who I am communicating through, who know these practices and can teach them to others. Kinkel, *Mary Magdalene Beckons*, loc 483-484.

²²² The phrase is from psychologist Carl Rogers. Rogers broke with psychoanalytic convention in his practice by allowing the patient to face the analyst. The analyst focused on being a positive source of mirroring and a container for negative discharge. In retrospect it is clear Rogers was dealing with a patient base whose issues stemmed from attachment and narcissistic issues more so than the Oedipal dynamics of Victorian Europe. For the influence of Humanistic psychology on American culture at large (including the New Age), see Groban, *Encountering America*.

²²³ Kinkel, *Sublime Union*, 57.

²²⁴ “[Mary Magdalene speaking] You are correct in your awareness that your sensitivity is unusual amongst people on Earth at this time. It is not unusual for higher-dimensional beings, but that is not who you are interacting with on the physical plane. You are different from most, and most find you difficult to understand. They do not, in general, have the ability to understand you on their own because you are ahead of them in terms of capabilities.” Ibid 178.

²²⁵ “[Mary Magdalene speaking] You are in pain right now and have called on me. I’ve come to you to help you. My dear sister, I am enfolding you in my arms and holding you. It is safe for you to drop into your feelings, to experience them fully, and to express them, just as a young child does naturally. You are in pain because of feeling alone when you want to be close, and it is Tony in particular you want to be close to. You have not had the contact with him you desire over the last few days.” Kinkel, *Sublime Union*, 177-178.

CONCLUSION

Comparing the counter-memories of Mary Magdalene analyzed within this chapter brings certain similarities into focus. In this conclusion I will highlight three: the sacredness of sexuality; the deconstruction of traditional gender norms; and the restored *ekklesia* of the early Christian community.

The ways in which Mary Magdalene's sexual life has been reimagined in these counter-memories shows that the penitent harlot has not been left entirely behind. The traditional memory of Mary Magdalene was already sexualized. Readers have seized on her identification as Jesus' *koinonos* in the Gospel of Philip to translate this sexualized image into a new form. In the writings of Margaret Starbird, Gloria Amendola, and Rosamonde Miller, Mary is the monogamous bride of Jesus. She comes to represent the prototype of a partnership of equals. In other memories, however, Mary Magdalene represents a sexually liberated woman with multiple husbands, children from different fathers, and flings on the side. Kinstler's *The Moon Under her Feet* gives Mary three husbands, four children, and numerous other sexual partners, for instance. In this novel and the channeled works of Amendola and Kinkel she is understood to be a powerful sexual presence – the leader in the bedroom with Jesus or whomever.

Schaberg's assertion that the making of Mary Magdalene into Jesus' wife or lover seems "a patriarchal attempt to complete the process of her "redemption" from a whore into the form of a "normal" woman, reabsorbed into society," strikes me as only partially true.²²⁶ Analyzing how women in this chapter have utilized the memory of Mary as Jesus' lover points in a different direction. Scholars such as Elliott Wolfson, Jeffrey Kripal, and Mark Jordan have all argued that the Judeo-Christian tradition, with its lack of a female deity, leads to homoerotic structure of male mysticism.²²⁷ In Catholicism, the only goddess is not only a virgin – she's your mom.²²⁸ We might make a similar point for female Christians. Even in medieval accounts of bridal mysticism, such as Theresa of Avila's, the erotic relationship is sublimated into a vision of the penetration of the soul, for Jesus too is a virgin. The revised memory of Mary Magdalene as lover found in the *Gospel of Philip* also makes Jesus a sexual being. In turn, contemporary women, by identifying with Mary, can enter into a sacred sexual relationship with Jesus.

²²⁶ Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, 102.

²²⁷ See Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines*; Kripal, *Serpent's Gift*, 29-58; Idem, *Roads of Excess*, particularly 14-21 and 72-79; Jordan, *The Silence of Sodom*. One should also mention Jennings, *The Man Jesus Loved* and *Jacob's Wound*.

²²⁸ I am shamelessly using Jeffrey Kripal's joke here.

Second, revised memories of Mary Magdalene function as critiques of genders norms and female roles within the Christian tradition. One of the great serendipities of 20th century archaeology is that these texts were rediscovered and published during the great wave of political feminism in the 1960's and 70's America. As has been shown, Anne Brock, Jane Schaberg, and Margaret Starbird cite the *Gospel of Mary* to argue that women should be allowed leadership and priestly roles in the Catholic Church. Depictions of Mary Magdalene as a priestess of Isis or Goddess may be historically implausible, but they too are keyed to deconstruct the subservience of women in a patriarchal culture. By serving as a priestess or goddess, Mary is more than just an apostle – she is a visionary, charismatic, and powerful person on equal stature with Jesus.

Third, depictions of Mary Magdalene analyzed in this chapter show much more concern for the environment, the politically and oppressed, and the religious other than those concerning Jesus, Lost Christians, or countercultural Gnostics. Authors such as Elisabeth Fiorenza, Schaberg, Starbird, and Amendola all present the earliest Christian community as radically egalitarian. The subsequent imbalance between masculine and feminine qualities wreaked havoc across the environment through pollution, politically through dictatorships and exploitation of workers, and in religions as Christianity became an exclusive, intolerant system. By extension, these authors are making a veiled critique of neoliberal capitalism, corporations, lax pollution laws, and any hint of intolerance within a democratic society.

Conclusion

“It is mourning that puts loss and history together. Mourning is a part of both loss and memory. In fact, loss, mourning, and memory are inseparable from each other...this continuity makes it possible to explore the dark side of modernization: its failure to recognize that a dimension of loss— at times personal, at other times collective and historical—always accompanies progress.”
~ Peter Homans¹

“If Christianity recovers its roots, it will undergo a transformation. A new version of Christianity will involve a recision of many traditional elements and the creation of new symbols, stories, and a new cult. A reformation is imminent when a movement reviews and revises the records of how it got started.” ~ Robert Funk²

“We need an upgrade of the Protestant Revolution, one that incorporates the gnosis of Christ consciousness. Imagine already established churches – the one on your block – enhancing their services with meditation, prayer, breathwork, energy healing, body movement, possibly even late-night dancing, and, among the more radicalized, the dispensing of psychoactive sacraments. Why build entirely new systems for connecting to Christ consciousness when the institutions – whether Methodist, Lutheran, or Baptist – have already been created?” ~ Jonathan Phillips³

The Heretical Revival and the Dialectic of Tradition

When Muhammad Ali smashed open that red earthenware jar in December 1945, little could he have known the popularity and impact the ancient codices contained therein would have. Those codices would come to alter our understanding of Christian origins and contribute to new Christologies in the west. They would inspire films, novels, comic books and visual art. The codices would become an American celebrity featured in New York Times best-sellers, serve as the subject of documentaries watched by millions, and, with *The Da Vinci Code*, inform one of the best-selling books of the 21st century. New age channels, Gnostic priests, and mainline

¹ Homans, *Symbolic Loss*, 16.

² Funk, *Honest to Jesus*, 306.

³ Phillips, *The Electric Jesus*, 82.

pastors would look to these new texts to bring the forgotten past back to life. Muhammad was concerned about unleashing a *jinn*. Turns out he set free something far more powerful.

In this dissertation we have analyzed how the codices became a source for major documentaries, historical novels, genre fiction, comic books, newspaper articles, magazines, and popular films. We have analyzed the impact of the Nag Hammadi on everyone from Methodist pastors to new age channels, Gnostic priests, and spiritual but not religious individuals. The impact of the codices has been shown in new conceptions of the Christian canon, new ritual practices, revised theological positions from Christian readers and writers, and new positions on sexuality, gender, and personhood within the American-Christian context. In short, the primary impact of the Nag Hammadi Codices in America has been shown to be as a new resource for the dialectic of the past with the present within Christianity, broadly construed.

Within the pages of this dissertation we have seen how the focus of these religious receptions of the Nag Hammadi Library has been the reimagination of Christian symbols. This would seem to be an obvious point in the cases of pastors, priests, and mainline Christians. What has been more interesting is how this emphasis on reinterpreting Christian symbols through the Nag Hammadi codices has been practiced by individuals and groups with no ties to organized Christianity in America. In chapter one, on Jesus, such reinterpretations encompass the Mythicist paradigm of Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy, Rajneesh and John Newman's Tantric Jesus, the sexual Jesus of *Holy Blood*, *Holy Grail* and *The Da Vinci Code*, and Jonathan Talat Phillips' electric Jesus. Chapter two, Lost Christianities, showed how individuals looked to texts from the Nag Hammadi Library to expand and enrich Christian traditions beyond the confines of the master narrative. Stephan Hoeller's return to the sacraments of *The Gospel of Philip*, Elaine Pagels' expansion of Christian identities to includes heretics, the "lost gospels" novels *Burning Words* and *Resurrection*, and ultimately with the attempts to completely reformulate the Christian canon by Hal Taussig in *A New New Testament*.

Most surprising, I think, is how the memory of countercultural Gnostics as antagonists to traditional Christianity have been repurposed so that individuals can find new means of connecting to Christian symbols. As was shown, authors Philip K. Dick, Grant Morrison, and John Lamb Lash were all connected to protestant forms of Christianity in their youth. As adults they would become alienated from tradition. In a period of disillusion, depression, or identity confusion, each of them would then have an intense religious experience that they interpreted to be of Christ. In each instance, the Nag Hammadi Codices gave these three authors a new

resource in Christian memory to interpret their visions – and therefore come to a new Christology – in ways that kept them well outside traditional Christianity. With Harold Bloom the issue is somewhat different. He never was, nor never intended, to be a Christian. But even in his case we saw how the Nag Hammadi allowed him to reinterpret the figure of Jesus as a Jewish Gnostic thinker that later tradition misremembered and misinterpreted. And both Miguel Conner and Jeremy Puma showed how the turn to the Nag Hammadi Codices allowed them both to reconfigure their previous Gnostic identities in ways that brought them closer to Christianity and its symbols (even if, as in the case of Conner, they have no historical referent).

Throughout many of these counter-memories we have seen the “return of the repressed.” The texts of the Nag Hammadi Library are not read by most of these authors in ways that would pass peer review. The meaning found in the repressed memory is, rather, a product of the fusing of the needs and desires of our present moment and the ancient past these texts represent. Authors, religious leaders, and forms of media have understood the Nag Hammadi codices in ways that emphasize their impact on traditional Christian memory. They have used the Nag Hammadi Library to new counter-memories of early Christianity that require the narrative identity, in this case the tradition of Christianity, to be rewritten.

The counter-memories of early Christianity developed through readings of the Nag Hammadi Library have been shown to be enormously diverse. Some are exceptionally hostile to traditional Christianity: Philip K. Dick’s assertion the Catholic Church worships Satan and John Lamb Lash’s hypothesis Christianity is a virus of mind-control utilized by the archons are perhaps the most severe. In such memories the legitimacy of traditional Christian memory invested in the apostles and the Christ of the creeds is evil. Other counter-memories, such as the Mythicist Christianity of Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy, are made to show members of the early church were intellectually and spiritually backward: they could not understand that the gospels were fictions.

Popular and highly influential counter-memories from the Jesus Seminar, *The Da Vinci Code*, and Elaine Pagels’ *The Gnostic Gospels* question the legitimacy of traditional authority and aver that the Nag Hammadi codices could point us back to a more genuine form of Christian belief and practice. The Jesus Seminar argued that Q showed how early Christians misinterpreted Jesus as an apocalyptic preacher, and that *The Gospel of Thomas* gives us evidence he taught a realized eschatology. *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* and *The Da Vinci Code* both use Nag Hammadi texts (*The Gospel of Philip*) to support the radical counter-memory that Jesus was married and

his wife, Mary Magdalene, gave birth to their child. Pagels' *The Gnostic Gospels* is less dramatic but more forceful. By presenting the orthodox-heterodox divide in political terms she authorizes her readers to approach the Nag Hammadi Library as forms of Christianity that were *politically* marginalized. Their spiritual or religious meaning was another matter altogether. Hal Taussig's *A New New Testament* is the logical endpoint of Pagels' argument. The canon itself is understood as a political product. With the political debates of the early church now over, it is possible to expand the very notions of the canon itself.

The counter-memories analyzed in this dissertation have also attempted to elevate a figure from the Christian past above their role in traditional memory. For Gilles Quispel and Stephan Hoeller in particular, the rediscovery of *The Gospel of Truth* points to a more mystical, introspective, and individualistic form of Christianity that could have won had Valentinus been elected Bishop of Rome. More significantly, texts like *The Gospel of Mary* and *Gospel of Philip* have been shown to inspire a host of memories that elevate Mary Magdalene to a stature above the other apostles, especially Peter. In work from scholars such as Jane Schaberg and Ann Brock, we saw how the Nag Hammadi library could be read to support the argument Mary Magdalene was designated the first and primary apostle by Jesus. In the more popular receptions of Margaret Starbird, historical novels, and New Age channels, Mary Magdalene is not just elevated to primary apostle. She is the Goddess and Divine Feminine, equal counterpart to Jesus of Nazareth.

In sum, the Nag Hammadi Library has been read in a huge variety of ways (distinct counter-memories), but the unifying factor is how these readings have been used to critique traditional Christian memory.

As should be expected, this assault on traditional Christian memory from across American religion and culture has led to a response from religious leaders who identify with that Christian tradition (Catholic, Evangelical, or mainline Protestant). Their counter has come in the form of books, documentaries, sermons, and debates. Taken together, these responses function as a neo-heresiology. Leaders such as Ben Witherington III, Darrell Bock, Luke Timothy Johnson, and Peter Jones each argue for the historical veracity of traditional Christian memory vis-à-vis the counter-memories charted above. The texts of the Nag Hammadi Library were, in their estimation, late, derivative, and in any case spiritually unsound. This neo-heresiology is bound up with the dialectic of the past with the present. That is, these authors key contemporaries they brand as *heretics* to the Nag Hammadi texts. In other words, by proclaiming the veracity of

traditional memory legitimizes traditional churches and the morals they embody (for these authors, conservative). And by keying the heretics of old with religious leaders in the present, they seek to de-legitimize alternative forms of Christian belief and practice in the present.

Neo-Heresiology

Preserving Traditional Memory

The counter-memories of Jesus of Nazareth, Lost Christians, the Gnostics, and Mary Magdalene charted in this dissertation led to a flurry of responses from conservative religious leaders. A look at the titles of their books is telling: *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*; *Stolen Identity: The Conspiracy to Reinvent Jesus*; *Dethroning Jesus: Exposing Popular Culture's Quest to Unseat the Biblical Christ*; *The Case for the Real Jesus*; *What Have They Done with Jesus?: Beyond Strange Theories and Bad History*; *The Missing Gospels: Unearthing the Truth Behind Alternative Christianities*; *The Heresy of Orthodoxy: How Contemporary Culture's Fascination with Diversity Has Reshaped Our Understanding of Early Christianity*; *The Gnostic Empire Strikes Back*.⁴

These books come from pastors (Ben Witherington III, Peter Jones), academics (Darrell Bock, Luke Timothy Johnson, Witherington III, Michael Kruger), and popular authors (Lee Stroebel). Their defense of the Jesus and Mary of canonical memory and the creeds is accomplished through critiques of the historical-critical method, disparaging the Nag Hammadi texts (and the Gnostics who wrote them), and assertions that the canonical gospels provide reliable historical witnesses. However, behind these historical arguments lays a suspicion of the ideals and values these neo-heresiologists see informing the Nag Hammadi scholarship. In other words, they argue that the Nag Hammadi Library is being mis-used to recreate Christianity in a progressive direction, and that this deconstructs the truth of the tradition as it has been conserved for nearly 2000 years.

⁴ Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*; Jones, *Stolen Identity: The Conspiracy to Reinvent Jesus*; *Breaking the Da Vinci Code*; *The Gnostic Empire Strikes Back*; Bock, *The Missing Gospels: Unearthing the Truth Behind Alternative Christianities*; Bock & Wallace, *Dethroning Jesus: Exposing Popular Culture's Quest to Unseat the Biblical Christ*; Stroebel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*; Witherington III, *What Have They Done with Jesus?: Beyond Strange Theories and Bad History*; *The Heresy of Orthodoxy*; Kruger and Köstenberger, *How Contemporary Culture's Fascination with Diversity Has Reshaped Our Understanding of Early Christianity*.

Neo-heresiologists pillory the scholarship of members of the Jesus Seminar and, by extension, any who seek to give historical priority to *The Gospel of Thomas* to imagine a new historical Jesus. Luke Timothy Johnson, Professor of Christian Origins at Emory University, calls it all “ersatz scholarship.”⁵ “This is not responsible, or even critical, scholarship. It is a self-indulgent charade.”⁶ Johnson finds that the Seminar made presumptions about the early dating of Thomas and used the newfound gospel to critique those from the canon. In his estimation, the Seminar is a thinly veiled attack on traditional Christianity and an episode in the culture wars.⁷ Ben Witherington III, a Methodist pastor and Professor at Asbury Theological Seminar, puts it this way:

Funk, Crossan, and their kin have engaged in a method that casts a net with large holes into the canonical ocean, while recasting a net of fine mesh into the apocryphal sea. The result is that they have caught what they are looking for – a radical, countercultural Jesus, a magician with little or no Jewish fare but more like a wandering cynic, espousing modern politically correct notions of radical egalitarians and a world with few if any boundaries between sinner and saint, good and bad, in and out, believer and infidel.⁸

In other words, their historical methods (voting with colored beads, focusing on the sayings of Jesus without reference to his life, discounting the evidence of canonical witnesses) are contrived to promote a counter-cultural wisdom Jesus. Throughout the neo-heresiological literature, however, we find the claim repeated that *Thomas* is dependent upon the canonical gospels, not an independent and parallel witness.⁹ As such, they claim any resemblance between Thomas and the gospels is one of borrowing.

Similar arguments for late-dating and the primary witness of the canonical gospels is used by neo-heresiologists to discount lost or alternative Christianities. Darrell Bock is perhaps the leading spokesperson for this critique. In his *The Missing Gospels*, Bock evaluates the claims of scholars such as Karen King and Elaine Pagels that primitive Christianity featured a diverse array of beliefs from which the orthodox only emerged in the 3rd-4th centuries. He argues they overstate the case. Namely, in his view orthodoxy is the earliest and primary form of Christianity as featured in 1st century witnesses, ranging from New Testament texts to works of witness, such

⁵ Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, xi.

⁶ Ibid 26.

⁷ Ibid 22.

⁸ Witherington, *The Jesus Quest*, 79.

⁹ See: Stroebel, *The Real Jesus*, 41; Bock & Wallace, *Dethroning Jesus*, 129; Jones, *Stolen Identity*, 197-199; Witherington, *What Have They Done?*, 28.

as those of Clement of Rome (1st cent CE – 99? CE).¹⁰ This evidence shows an early movement praising Jesus, united in their appeal to Apostolic tradition and missionary work that passed on their teachings. According to Bock and other neo-heresiologists, earliest Orthodoxy exhibited uniformity: there is one Creator God; Jesus was both human and divine, suffered and was raised bodily, and is worthy of worship; salvation was largely about sin and forgiveness through Christ; and this salvation realized the promises of Israel's Law and Prophecy.¹¹

For Bock, these “alternative Christianities” are ultimately expressions of Gnosticism, not Christianity. Its texts lack such a claim for historical primacy, group cohesion or theological unity found in the Orthodox church. He argues none of the Gnostic texts can be dated to the 1st century, save certain sayings in *The Gospel of Thomas*. Gnosticism was widespread in the second century, but the Valentinians, Sethians, and other Gnostic groups lacked a unifying theology or group church along the lines of Orthodoxy. Bock argues that there is a certain theological similarity across these groups, but that similarity is from their dualistic reading of Genesis and the influence of Jewish Apocalypticism.¹² In other words, these alternative Christianities came later and have diluted or perverted the true, original Christianity of the apostles and passed on in the canonical gospels.

As regards the counter-memories of Mary Magdalene, neo-heresiologists make arguments that preserve the authority of the apostles and question the extent to which the Nag Hammadi texts exhibit the feminist views their readers find in them. The latter argument typically invokes *The Gospel of Thomas* logion 114, which we have reviewed numerous times in this dissertation. Witherington points out that this saying is misogynistic, given that Mary has to sacrifice her femininity to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.¹³ The ascetic nature of texts like the Gospel of Philip further proves that Gnostics did not acknowledge equality of women unless the renounced their femininity.¹⁴ Darrell Bock confronts the issue of Mary's apostolic status. In his usual, measured way, Bock describes how Mary clearly played an important role in the early Christian movement (as witness to the crucifixion and resurrection) and was a disciple of Jesus.¹⁵ She was not a prostitute. However, Bock also asserts, the evidence simply does not indicate that

¹⁰ Bock, “Making a Scorecard: The Periods and Players of Early Christianity,” in *The Missing Gospels*.

¹¹ “The reason we have no evidence for early diversity is that the early faith actually was not so diverse. Most opponents in the earliest works are troublesome blips on the screen.” Bock, Darrell L.. *The Missing Gospels*, Locations 3040-3041.

¹² Ibid, loc 3118.

¹³ Witherington, *What Have They Done?*, 44.

¹⁴ Ibid, 41-42.

¹⁵ Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code*, 27-30.

she had a status equal to the twelve disciples chosen by Jesus: “the qualifications for the role of apostle in its most technical sense of the Twelve were that the person (1) be male, (2) be with Jesus from the beginning, and (3) be a witness to the resurrection.”¹⁶

Taken together, these defenses of traditional memory re-assert the privileged status of the New Testament, question the historical methods of scholars like the Jesus Seminar, and question the motives of those who produce counter-memories. In the next section I examine their own “meaning of memory”: what these authors intend to preserve by affirmation the traditional meanings of Christian symbols.

The Meaning of Traditional Memory

Just as the individuals who produce counter-memories adapted Christian symbols to 20th and 21st century America, those who want to preserve traditional memory want to legitimize their own political, humanist, and economic perspectives. When neo-heresiologists speak of the Gnostics or Gnosticism it is usually to denigrate contemporary religious practitioners by keying them into the Nag Hammadi Library. The most representative authors here are Peter Jones, a Presbyterian Minister with a PhD from Princeton Theological Seminary, and Peter Burfeind, campus pastor at Toledo University and contributor to the online conservative magazine *The Federalist*.¹⁷ These neo-heresiologists see the Gnosticism of the Nag Hammadi Library in a culture war with the true Christian tradition. By extension, as they argue against Gnosticism, these authors are arguing for free market Capitalism, pro-life, a one man-one woman view of marriage, and an exclusive religious viewpoint where Christianity is the only truth.

Peter Jones inaugurated this wave of neo-heresiology in 1992 with *The Gnostic Empire Strikes Back: An Old Heresy for the New Age*. In it he equates the New Age movement with the ancient Gnostics and sees this new Gnosticism at war with traditional Christians: “We [traditional Christians] are suddenly confronted with a many-headed monster intent on obliterating the Christian faith.”¹⁸ He charges that we are not far from the time when “those who profess absolute truth, the specific Creator and Redeemer God of the Bible, and biblical ethical behavior will be silenced by any means.”¹⁹ Peter Burfeind elaborates on how pervasive the Gnostic influence is:

¹⁶ Ibid, 140.

¹⁷ <http://thefederalist.com/author/peter-m-burfeind/>

¹⁸ Jones, *Gnostic Empire*, 7.

¹⁹ Ibid, 8.

The Gnostic movement works its program through culture, politics, and religion. Precisely because Gnosticism doesn't have marked doctrines or creedal statements, being more a "spiritual orientation," it can easily be coopted in non-religious arenas – in politics, marketing, and media – without fear of being accused of religious imposition, when in fact that is exactly what it is.²⁰

In other words, a culture war is on. The Gnostics have control of the culture, politics, and are coming for traditional religion.

The Gnostic religion is typified as narcissistic and self-centered in contradistinction to traditional religion, seen as community-oriented. In texts like *The Gospel of Thomas*, salvation “becomes a human self-help program.”²¹ If each person can become a Christ then the savior becomes superfluous.²² This turn toward the individual, away from the church and its traditional teachings, helps lead to the heretical deviations from the faith in contemporary religion and culture.

The Gnostic resurgence is seen as responsible for the decline of adherence to traditional verities. Jones reads Jesus’ statement in Gospel of Thomas logion 3, particularly “When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known and you will realize that it is you who are sons of the living Father,” as evidence divine self-realization is a permission to transgress all cultural laws: “they realize who they are – a part of the divine. . .capable of anything; and untrammelled by human traditions, creational structures, or divine laws.”²³ Burfiend makes the equation between conservative ideals and these divine laws explicit:

Such naturally-arising concepts as gender, national boundaries, the cold hard realities of economics, cultural institutions like family and church (especially its rituals), marriage, even language, are deceptive impositions, says the Gnostic, of a foreign God upon what should be the authentic Self liberated from all impositions of form, freed to transcend them altogether.²⁴

That is, the free market, national boundaries, gender identity, marriage, and the church are the natural and divine occurring forms that the Gnostic (deceptively, for Burfiend) believes they are able to break free from.

²⁰ Burfeind, Peter. *Gnostic America: A Reading of Contemporary American Culture & Religion according to Christianity's Oldest Heresy* (Kindle Locations 164-167). Kindle Edition.

²¹ Witherington, *What Have They Done?*, 33.

²² Jones, *Gnostic Empire*, 53-55.

²³ Ibid, 26. NHC II,2.32.19-33.7.

²⁴ Burfiend, *Gnostic America*, loc 148-151.

Unsurprisingly, then, the Gnostics and their texts are keyed to make explicit condemnations of progressive ideals. Regarding political feminism, Burfeind argues that traditional gender roles arose because “reality shows women as generally vulnerable, appreciating a good man in their lives.”²⁵ The celebration of powerful female figures such as Mary Magdalene as a Goddess conveys how radical feminism is deconstructing tradition (the creator God is evil) and jettisoning traditional family values.²⁶

The Gnostic impulse is also seen to be behind progressive calls for same-sex marriage. Jones reads logion 22 from Thomas, “and when you make the male and the female into a single one. . .then you shall enter the kingdom” as a “radical refusal of sexual differentiation, and a confusion of sexual identity. Behind these sayings is the classic Gnostic refusal of creational sexuality as presented in the Genesis account.”²⁷ He sees the same impulse behind social sanctioning of homosexuality and avers “as homosexuality is legally institutionalized and more and more accepted as a normal expression of human sexuality, pedophilia will likely become a major civil rights issue.”²⁸ In other words, because homosexuality is marked off as a transgression, the deviants will be willing to accept other, similarly classed transgressions such as pedophilia.

Neo-heresiologists are concerned that Christianity is being treated as just another world religion, an option on the religious marketplace, and not the truth. As Luke Timothy Johnson puts it, “One perspective [conservative] views Christianity as based in God’s self-disclosure or revelation. . .the other perspective [liberal] sees Christianity as another among the world’s religions, that is, fundamentally as a cultural reality rooted in human construction of symbolic worlds.”²⁹ If Christianity is a human construction then individuals can mix and match like the Gnostics of old did. Gnosticism then and now allows, in Witherington’s terms, “a syncretism of Jewish, Christian, and pagan ideas as if all were equally valid and valuable sources of truth, and attitude that early Jews and Christians of the New Testament did not share.”³⁰

²⁵ “Or again, reality shows women as generally vulnerable, appreciating a good man in their lives. Single women and single mothers bear crushing burdens and demands from all directions. No, says Hollywood. Women are independent warriors, the equal or betters of men in physical competition, who shine brightest when freed from male patronage. Traditional gender roles are nihilistically destroyed, but they are replaced by a newly crafted image.” Burfeind, Peter. *Gnostic America*, (Kindle Locations 219-222).

²⁶ Jones, *Gnostic Empire*, 52.

²⁷ Jones, *Gnostic Empire*, 32.

²⁸ Ibid 68.

²⁹ Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, 57.

³⁰ Witherington, *What Have They Done?*, 45.

Taken as a whole, then, these neo-heresiologists are using the Nag Hammadi Library and memory of the Gnostics to defend the tradition, not upset it. They use this tradition to legitimize culturally conservative ideals (pro-life, heterosexual marriage, the free market, traditional gender roles) and offer critiques of contemporary religious deviance (introspection, self-absorption, eclectic and pluralistic). The war over the meaning of the Nag Hammadi Library is clearly about more than the historical record. It is about what that record can legitimize in the present.

The Role of Historiography in the Reception of the Nag Hammadi Library

“So which one is right?” In talking with colleagues, friends, and family about my research project, I have heard some variation of this question numerous times. With friends and family the question was voiced overtly. They wanted to know what the real or true origins of Christianity were and how the Nag Hammadi Library tells us about them. With colleagues the question was more implied. Numerous times after I presented a paper, a colleague would giggle at the seeming absurdity of author whose counter-memory I discussed and ask whether the author was aware just how wrong they were. The motivation behind such questions appears to be two-fold: 1) determining the historical context of a text and its original meaning for the person or community that produced it is important to scholars and laypersons; and 2) there is an implicit (I would say *epistemic* in the Foucauldian sense) correlation at work between historical veracity and religious truth.

As a historian who works in part within Gnostics Studies, I take no issue with the first point. It is important to get our translations correct, make strong arguments for how and why they were written, who they were read by, and what impact these texts had going forward. That is the goal of academic historical-criticism.

As a historian of religions, however, the second point strikes me as odd. There is no necessary correlation between *historical* truth behind a religion and its *religious* truth. If an absolutely perfect history were reconstructed of the life of Jesus and the origins of the Christian movement, would the version of belief and practiced based on it be the *true* version of Christianity? Or would an individual or community that most closely modeled their belief and practice on the historical reconstructions of Nag Hammadi texts be the most religiously accurate, self-described Gnostic? Why?

All world religions are traditions that have *points* of origin, plural. They were fashioned from the religious, philosophical, artistic, and scientific materials at hand, and they reflected the socio-political and economic environment they arose from. These traditions were then refashioned again and again in their adaptations to new locations and times. That is to say, religious traditions have always developed by reinterpreting their symbols and scriptures to adapt them to new contexts. *All* religions in this sense “misappropriate” (or more accurately, interpret) their source material to key it to their present circumstances. If this were not the case, then every reception history could be summed up in a single sentence (with a *very* long footnote).³¹

Tracing the religious receptions of the Nag Hammadi Library offers as an unprecedented look at how the reformulation of tradition occurs in real-time. As a “return of the repressed” Christian memory, the Nag Hammadi Library is a being used by individuals and groups to revision the period of Christian origins and, by extension, alter the practice and beliefs in relation to Christian symbols in the present. As historians such as Bruce Lincoln, Yael Zerubavel, and Eric Hobsbawm have shown, individuals and groups revise mythic origins (whether of a religion or a nation) in order to assert a competing model of that tradition.³² The Nag Hammadi Library is being used to this end as individuals generate counter-memories of the Christian tradition through it. The responses we read from traditional religions leaders like Witherington III, Luke Timothy Johnson, and Peter Jones all indicate that *they too* know that this is what is happening.

The politics of memory at work in Nag Hammadi Library reception is different from similar political battles over symbols prior to the modern age in that the claim is through *historiography*. That is, while these memories have varying degrees of historical validity (determined from an academic perspective), all of them claim to have this validity. Many of them couch these claims in volumes that look like academic histories, complete with footnotes, translations, and lengthy bibliographies.³³ The *claim* is the important thing. It shows the legitimizing function of historical discourse, and a desire on behalf of these authors to achieve that validity. These claims have no intrinsic value. They are an expression of the symbolic

³¹ Wendy Doniger makes a similar joke, and I shamelessly reuse it here.

³² Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*; Idem., *Between History and Myth*; Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*; Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Traditions*; see also Hammer & Lewis, *The Invention of Sacred Tradition*; Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*.

³³ Of the works analyzed in this dissertation, see especially Newman, *Quest for the Kingdom*; Keizer, *The Kabbalistic Words of Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas*; Freke and Gandy, *The Jesus Mysteries*; Starbird, *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar*; Baigent et al, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*.

capital that belongs to historical discourse and claims of origins for the social body in this particular time (20th-21st century) and place (the west).³⁴

Professional, academic historians have therefore been shown to play an ambiguous role in this reception history. Insofar as American readers and viewers are much more interested in how the Nag Hammadi find impacts Christianity, texts that are non-Christian (and the scholars who devoted their lives to studying them) have played a limited role in this reception history. The work of historians who do work on the more popular texts (Thomas, Mary, Philip) may be used towards purposes that contradict the scholarship. We saw this with *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*'s invocation of Helmut Koester to proclaim all texts from the Nag Hammadi Library were older than the canonical gospels, and again with John Newman's misinterpretation of April DeConick's "rolling corpus" theory of *The Gospel of Thomas*. Scholars and their work are invoked to lend legitimacy to claims the scholars themselves would not support.

On the other hand, select scholars are keenly aware of the dialectic of the past with the present and how their own scholarship can be used to reimagine the Christian tradition. Pagels' recognized in *Beyond Belief* how "religious traditions survive through time only as their adherent relive and reimagine them and, in the process, continually transform them."³⁵ As discussed in chapter two, *A New New Testament* was collected and published with the explicit purpose of allowing readers to see the Christian tradition anew. In other words, some scholars are becoming *reflexive* about the role their scholarship has in changing tradition and are writing accordingly. Or, as Jane Schaberg puts it in regards to her counter-memory of Mary Magdalene:

I do not aim to push my reading as the only possible one, nor can I restrict the reader's freedom. . . if I have failed to present a convincing, comprehensive reconstruction or reading, I hope I have failed well enough to destabilize existing "authoritative" readings

³⁴ Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 7: Symbolic capital refers to a "degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity or honour and is founded on a dialectic of knowledge (connaissance) and recognition (reconnaissance)"; Idem, *Distinction*, 291: symbolic capital is "the acquisition of a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honourability." In other words, historians and historiography are invested with symbolic prestige within the field of social production. Those asserting counter-memories therefore try to either invoke the prestige of a scholar, proclaim that they have this prestige, or mimic the formal requirements of historiography to argue their counter-memories. In a culture that did not invest so much prestige in historiography (due to its particular episteme), the method of arguing for a different mythic history would be different.

³⁵ Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 112. Also from Pagels on tradition, "Christian leaders who deny that such [religious] experience can teach us anything about God have often identified themselves as guardians of an unchanging tradition whose "faithfulness" consists in handing down only what they received from ancient witnesses, neither adding nor subtracting anything." Ibid 182.

and the oppressiveness of the whole Magdalene tradition. . .and encourage the desire to continue undermining and trespassing.³⁶

The Meaning of Memory, Symbolic Loss, and the Dialectic of Tradition

If the historical truth is not the primary issue in the religious reception of the Nag Hammadi codices, what is? I have argued throughout this dissertation that it is in the reinterpretation of Christian symbols to adapt them to the circumstances of America in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. More specifically, the Nag Hammadi Library has become a resource for those who felt alienated from Christianity due to a sense the tradition did not fully embrace the fruits of modernization (particularly religious pluralization, feminism, democratic humanism, the sexual revolution) or critique its excesses (unrestrained Capitalism, climate change, anti-modern fundamentalism). The counter-memories these authors produced imagined a form of Christianity that did better fit America than what they found in the churches.

I have presented certain “extreme cases” (to use William James’ term) throughout this dissertation to show how symbolic loss and interpretations of the Nag Hammadi Library are tightly intertwined.³⁷ Some of these cases, such as Robert Funk and Jane Schaberg, found themselves disillusioned with the Christian tradition after being exposed to historical scholarship. Others, such as Gilles Quispel, felt alienated from the tradition because it could not explain anomie (World War II). Elaine Pagels, Philip K. Dick, Harold Bloom, Jonathan Talat Phillips, and Margaret Starbird all found themselves in the depths of depression as they were dealing with personal tragedy or the loss of an ideal. Or finally, in cases such as those of John Lamb Lash, Grant Morrison, Dick, and Phillips, an individual experienced a series of intense visionary and religious experiences that completely undermined their worldview. The *nomos* or law that governed their cosmos was proven incomplete.

In all of these cases it is of the utmost significance that these individuals turned to the Nag Hammadi Codices in order to heal, re-idealize the Christian symbols, and explain the world in which they belong. To be sure, their interpretations and solutions to these dilemmas range far and wide. But their base, each exhibit a reinterpretation of the symbol of Christ and/or other

³⁶ Schaberg, *The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene*, 352.

³⁷ William James famously asserted the methodology of the “extreme case” in *Varieties of Religious Experience*. See James 2002, 48. By this, he meant that we can better understand the a subject better through study of a single case that brought the defining characteristics of the subject into high relief.

Christian symbols in ways that adapt these symbols to our present time and place. These reinterpretations made attempts to place Christ within a wide, religiously plural horizon of reference, whether Jesus was equated with an Indian guru, a witty wisdom sage, or a mythic archetype shared cross-culturally. These reinterpretations furthermore elevated the standing of each individual in a way that is consistent with the ideals of democratic humanism. The ideals of equality and liberty lend themselves to the notion that all humans are fundamentally divine, just as Jesus was. The fact so many texts in the Nag Hammadi Library speak of a divine spark or the identity between Jesus and disciple is a great happenstance of history. And in every case, there was an effort to utilize this notion of equality to imagine a more egalitarian form of gender relations in the past as a model for the present.

The same themes found in case studies that exhibit symbolic loss can be found in other places as well. As discussed in chapter two, documentaries produced by major networks focus on the role of women in the early church, a Jesus who taught human equality and divinity, sexual practices in the early church, and how the newly discovered texts parallel Buddhist or Hindu teachings. The most popular case examined in this reception history, *The Da Vinci Code*, stresses all of these points as well. Scholars whose work has achieved best-seller status, such as Elaine Pagels, or documentaries that dominated the Nielsen ratings, like National Geographic's "Gospel of Judas," do as well. The immensely popular works of Philip K. Dick and Grant Morrison were shown to reimagine Gnostic Christians in this direction as well. Finally, even in lesser known cultural products like the "Lost Gospels" genre, historical fiction, and popular histories, these same adaptations of Christian symbols to religious pluralism, feminist consciousness, the sexual revolution, and democratic humanism all play a central role.

It is too early in the reception history of the Nag Hammadi Library to surmise where this assortment of new interpretations of Christian symbols will lead American Christianity. We simply do not know. What the reception history does show us is that individuals hope to find in the ancient texts a form of Christianity that speaks to these fruits of modernization. If that hope or desire is any indication, then the Nag Hammadi Library shows us how the Christian tradition may be reimagined in the 21st century. And the Nag Hammadi Library itself could be a primary resource for those who do the reimagining.

In sum, the primary impact of the Nag Hammadi Library in American religion and culture has been on Christian memory. Individuals read the Nag Hammadi codices to reimagine Christian symbols that they can attach to and identify with. So doing, they are reimagining

Christianity in ways that draw them far outside the parameters of orthodox tradition. They are imagining forms of practice, belief, and identity that those hoping to conserve and uphold traditional Christianity find *heretical*. These conservatives brand the authors *heretics*. Perhaps they are. But as we have seen, heresy is not etymologically about right or wrong, true or false. It is about choice. And to paraphrase Peter Berger, in a modern world with multiple and competing plausibility structures, one has no choice but to choose.³⁸

³⁸ Berger, *The Heretical Imperative*, 40.

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